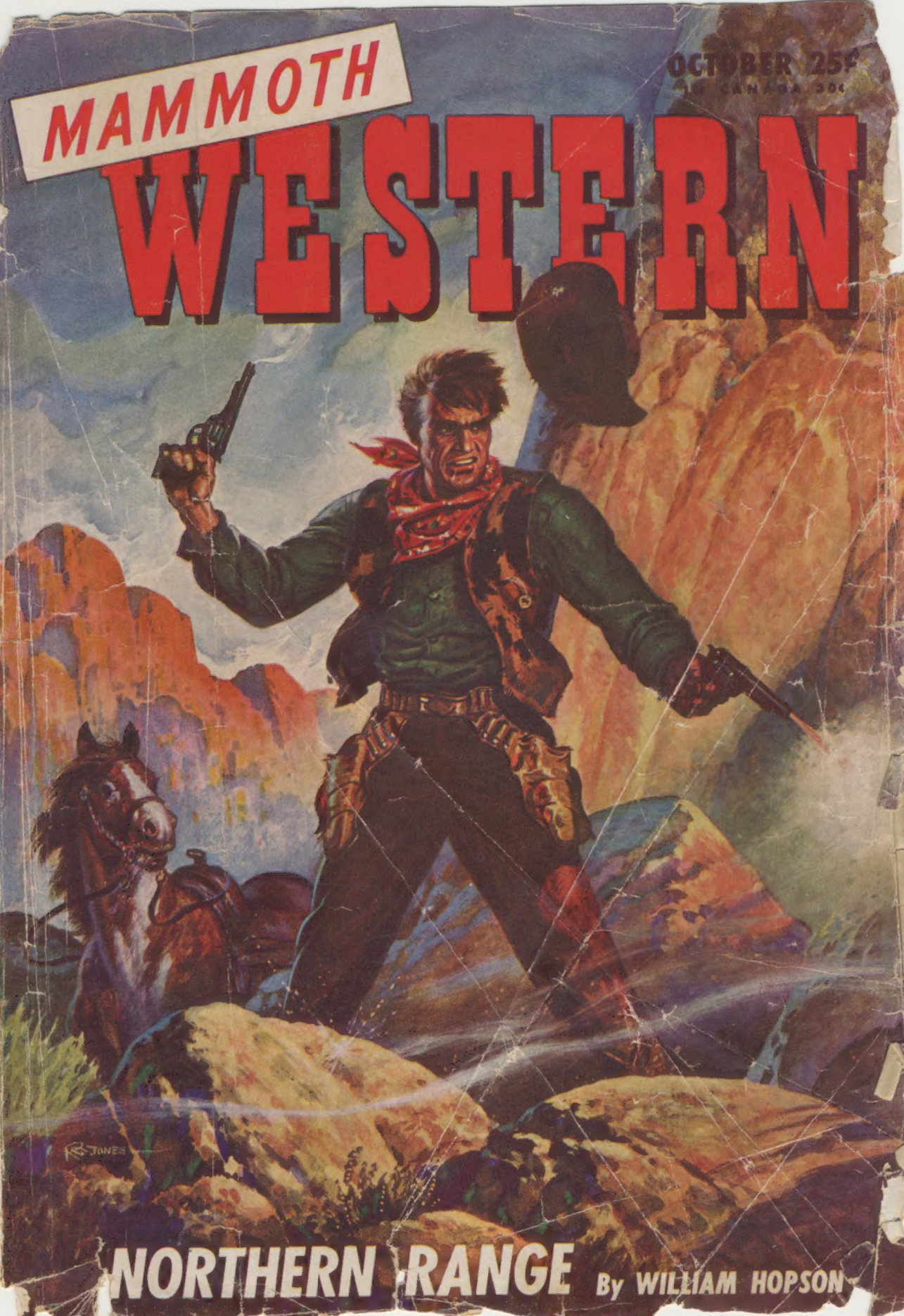
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NORTHERN RANGE By WILLIAM HOPSON

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A man's best friend is his dog—so they say. But Hank Baines had a vulture . . .

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The townfolk held their meetings in front of a cottonwood—with a noose for a gavel.

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Front cover painting by Robert Gipson Jones, illustrating a scene from "Northern Range"

MAMMOTH WESTERN ★ OCTOBER 1946

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Volume 2 Number 5

LAST month we told you about a tall gangling westerner who poked his nose into our office and tossed a manuscript on our desk entitled, "Montana." Well, this same westerner—William Hopson by name, had another manuscript tucked away in his brief case which he said was pretty good stuff too. After reading "Montana" our editorial ears were very receptive to news like this so we grabbed the briefcase and pulled out a book-length novel entitled, "Northern Range." We liked it so much that we got on the phone and called our Art Editor into a conference. The result was the swell cover on this issue by Robert Gipson Jones. But to get back to Hopson—here's a boy who not only can write about the West, but he knows it as well as his own name. "Northern Range" is a novel that's packed with heart stirring drama, fast action, and all the color and flavor of the West that Hopson knows so well. You can bet your boots you'll be seeing him again.

IF YOU'VE read any of our companion magazines—*Amazing Stories, Fantastic Adventures, Mammoth Detective, Mammoth Mystery,* or *Mammoth Adventure,* then you're very well acquainted with the name of Chester S. Geier. Chet is one of our most versatile writers in that he can turn out a western story with the same degree of excellence he has attained in the fantasy, detective, and adventure field. We've always maintained that the mark of a good writer lies in his ability to turn out a variety of stories—without losing the "touch" that makes him good. When you read, "Soul of the Vulture" in this issue, we feel pretty safe in saying that you'll agree with us. Geier has a habit of writing about people and their intimate problems. He strikes a note in his stories that is almost psychological. (And don't say there is no such thing as a psychological western!) In this story he tells you about a desert rat who had only one friend in the world, and that friend, of all things, was a vulture.

THEN we come to "A Neck for a Noose," by H. B. Hickey. Here's a yarn by another good writer. (At any rate we're not the only editors who think that Hickey is good, because he just sold a story to *Liberty Magazine.*) So it isn't out of place here to say that we've developed another writer for the slicks! . . . In this story, Hickey tells you about a community that was notorious for its mass meetings. The only bad feature about the town gatherings, however, was the fact that every time they met it was for a single purpose—to hang somebody. When you use this as a base, and throw in some fast action, and human drama, then you've got something . . .

FINISHING up the issue, but by no means last in first rate entertainment, we offer you "Jukebox Junction" by Berkeley Livingston. You've read stories by Livingston in MAMMOTH WESTERN before, so by now you know you're getting western fiction by a boy who knows how to write it. In this yarn you'll probably see a lot about jukeboxes—you know, the things you put your nickels in and are then rewarded with an outpouring of various noises—and this western town had its own share of jukeboxes. But the people of Jukebox Junction spent their nickels not for music, but to drown out the sound of gunfire—of which they had more than a small amount! We think the twist in this yarn is unusually good.

LAST month we introduced a new feature called "Cattle Country Quiz" which you readers received with open arms. We regret that we were not able to include this new feature in this issue, due to a lack of space, but next month you'll be able to pit your wits against Mr. Hines again—and every month thereafter. So apologies for now.

AS A passing thought it has just occurred to us that the West has really undergone a change in the past few years. One used to be able to travel through Arizona and New Mexico and see cattle grazing contentedly, with the spell of the old "frontiers" still in evidence. Today, however, you would have to keep your fingers crossed, hoping that an atomic bomb or V-2 rocket experiment didn't blow you into the eternal pastures. A far cry from the days of Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickok. We wonder just what the boys are thinking about it all . . .

NEXT month we'll have a number of treats in store for you. Robert Moore Williams will be on hand with a swell yarn called, "Tascosa Partners." We'll also have a unique little yarn by Ben Frank who knew a cattle man with a hobby. The hobby concerned the raising of bees. And the whole thing led to a stinging situation . . . Chester S. Geier will also be on hand with a swell short story about a desert rat who went crazy chasing turtles. But, at that he wasn't so crazy, as a couple of tough hombres found out later. Berkeley Livingston will also be on hand with a long story of the plains. . . . Which winds us up for now. See you again next month. . . .

Rap

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NORTHERN RANGE

By William Hopson

THE minister had said over old Quong's coffin, "It makes no difference of what race, creed, or color a man might be . . ." making it all pretty short because the sleet was driving slantingly down across the savannah and hitting us stingingly in the faces as we stood around the grave in the snowy cemetery, shivering in Montana winter weather that was not far from zero.

I remembered the minister's words; but as I drove the skidding car back toward town with the heater going and Lenore sitting bundled up beside me, I remembered most how old Quong, eighty at least, had looked in the riding outfit he hadn't worn in over forty years: spurred boots, white woolly chaps, black silk shirt, and the old, worn red bandana fastened with a cow horn ring around his mummy-like throat.

He had, during his last days of sickness, wanted it that way, and that was the way I had buried him.

The windshield wipers were making crusty sounds on the frozen glass, fighting the sleet, and the snow was banked high along the concrete curbing as my sister finally spoke.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Jim?" she said.

"Fifty-five years, Lenore," I said. "Yes, a long, long time . . ."

So I got to thinking back to the days

She slumped down beside the tombstone, her quiet sobs muffled in her sleeve

When a friend's a friend, it doesn't make a bit of difference what his color or creed is

when Montrose's streets hadn't been paved and it was just another small Montana cow town, where ranchers came in to buy supplies, racking their teams and ponies at the hitching rails where there were now service stations and parking meters and concrete paving; where the cow hands often got pretty high in the old wooden, false fronted saloons; where perhaps once or twice a year the roar of a single action six shooter presaged a dead man to be packed over to the combination furniture store and undertaking parlor.

Fifty-five years . . .

That morning at the ranch two and a half miles from town my father, Ed Devers, came down to the corral where I was all set to try my hand at topping a half broken bronk, using Wes Allen's saddle. It was a three-quarter rig—that is, the girth was three-quarters of the way from the cantle to the fork—and there wasn't too much danger of it going up over the bronc's shoulders in case he got his head down between his forelegs. My own saddle was rigged all the way forward, and I'd already taken two or three falls the previous winter in putting a horse down a six foot snow bank and having the back end kick up on me.

Dad leaned on the fence, waiting impatiently. We were in the middle of the summer haying season, cutting acre after acre of it growing wild in the basin, and the hands were stalling long enough to watch me top the pony. And Dad's hard, stern nature didn't countenance stalling, despite the heavy drinking and brooding he had done over the loss of Mom from pneumonia four years back. He was in his mid-fifties then and could still hit the saddle for a fourteen hour stretch had necessity demanded it. I remember that his eyes had gotten a little bloodshot of late and that he didn't sleep well. He was, however, still the stern ranchman, and now, as I got ready to top the pony, Dad twisted at the toothpick under his sand colored mustache and called, "Hurry it up, son. There's work to do."

BUT I was fifteen now, almost six feet of gaunt height, with a pair of hands the size of a grizzly's claws; and Dad wanted me to learn the cow business from the ground up. There was a lot to Montana ranching besides just handling cattle. We had to cut and stack wild hay in summer; saw blocks of ice three feet in thickness in winter and store it away between layers of sawdust for the coming summer; haul in wood on sled runners, build pole fences, skin dead cows, and a thousand other things. That was why I lived down in the bunkhouse with Wes Allen and Slim Holcomb and the other boys.

So I got the cinch tight and then unsnubbed the trembling roan from the post in the center of the horse corral. Wes was grinning, half hoping I'd get piled. He was about twenty-three or so, with blonde hair and a small wiry build that gave something cat-like to his appearance and movements.

"You want me to hold his head while you straddle him," Jim?" he called.

"Naw," I said scornfully, and adjusted the thong of the heavy leather quirt around my right wrist. "He ain't that wild. Just a little spooky. If he don't dump me, open the corral gate and let him work off steam down through the basin."

"If he doesn't dump you," Dad called, "head him south and try to find that mare again. She's got to be someplace down on the south range because there's no way she could get back to Ike's place where I bought her. I'm worried about that mule colt. She should have foaled by now."

"She was due last week, if I remem-

ber," I said.

"She's probably hiding out, but you go down and see if you can find her, son. If you can't find her by dinner time, saddle up another horse after dinner and try again this afternoon."

"All right," I said.

I was petting some of the spook out of the pony now, stroking his neck and shoulder with the reins in my left hand, easing it toward the headstall. If I could get a good grip on the left side of the headstall and pull his head around hard against his shoulder, he couldn't unlimber before I got into the saddle. Wes was still grinning and Slim Holcomb called in his Ft. Worth, Texas, drawl, "If you lenghtened them stirrups of yourn out to fit Jim's God awful long legs, Wes, then muh money's on Jim."

The roan quivered a little and let go slobbering sounds through his nostrils as I got hold of the headstall and then slipped a toe in the stirrup. He wasn't mean; he was just a little scared and spooky. Slim had taken the buck out of him a few weeks before and done it right, because Slim knew how to gentle a horse instead of breaking him. He didn't believe in treating one rough. With a little proper handling of the roan we'd have another good cow pony, after he got some cow experience at the fall roundup.

The roan slobbered again and then I pulled his head around hard, almost against his left shoulder. He started wheeling and the momentum pushed me up into the saddle and gave me a chance to get my feet set in the stirrups.

He tried a few half hearted bucks, and I let him go enough to work off steam and get it out of his system. We slammed around the circular corral with Wes calling advice and Dad leaning and watching and the roan kicking at the fence now and then.

I caught a glimpse of Dad's face. It was poker all the way through, but I knew he was pretty well pleased that his fifteen year old kid was already taller than most of the others and able to top off a spirited cow pony that wanted to get a few bucks out of its system. Not that he ever would have admitted it, for Dad was that kind. But I knew he was pleased, what with the other hands watching while they harnessed up teams to start in on the hay. He had never been what you'd call warm hearted or sentimental but after Mom was buried the three of us, him, my sister Lenore, and myself, grew a little closer together. We were trying, by being closer together, to fill in the gap left by Mom's death four years before.

Then, about the time I saw Dad's face, the roan fooled me. He took the bit between his teeth and really started bucking in earnest. His head went all the way down between his forelegs, leaving me in an island saddle up in the sky with nothing in front of me. I began to feel the hard, jarring impact of his stiffened legs go through my hips and insides, the kind that makes old men out of professional bronc stompers after a few years.

SO I stopped that in a hurry by snapping the handle of the flying quirt into my hand and letting him have the shot weighted ends of the leather between the ears; not hard. Just enough to sting him into surprise and make him let go of the bit. He let go in a hurry and I brought up his head. He broke into a run around the corral.

"Open the gate, Wes!" I yelled, spurring him away from the fence. You have to watch that kind of thing because many a bronc buster lost a leg when a mean horse flung itself against the poles and crushed the rider's bones. It had been done unintentionally by

good ponies like the roan, too.

I spurred him further away, hooking him up near the shoulder with the dull rowels and he hit for the center of the corral. "Open 'er up, Wes!" I yelled again. "Turn him out!"

The pole gate was already open when the roan hit for it. We tore off down past the bunkhouse and I let him go.

And go he did. We slammed down through the lush grass hay of the basin, shot past the first new stack, and kept right on going. The roan began to run himself out and I pulled him down to a nervous jog trot while his barrel heaved and sweat dampened his neck. He had the steam off now and was just another novice cow pony learning his A B C's, trotting along with first one ear and then the other flicking back and forth. I bent and patted him along the neck and talked to him like a Dutch Uncle.

"You're a good little ol' cow pony, Roanie," I said. "You can buck all you want to every morning to warm up and get the kinks out, just as long as you don't go turning mean on me. This fall I'll show you how to follow a loop. That means when you see that lariat go out after a yearling you watch it. If it gets him around the neck you better brace yourself for the shock and not get jerked off your feet. If it misses you got to keep your eye on that steer and keep right on going after him without me having to guide you . . ."

Two miles below the ranch the basin gave way to rougher country with a lot of queer rock ledges that were hard and smooth and with big cracks in them. Dad had said as how he reckoned there might have been a slight volcanic upheaval or something that had disturbed the earth, maybe even an earthquake, a few thousand years back. But the stock liked that area in summer during the heat of the day because water often collected in pockets among the rocks and it was cool, as was the shade beneath the ledges. We were running about eighty head of horses, along with four hundred and fifty head of cattle, and Dad had bred two of the mares to a big blue jack. He wanted to try out a team of mules on the ranch.

I hadn't liked the idea at all, hating a mule almost as much as sheep, but nobody except Lenore criticized Dad's decisions concerning the ranch. It wasn't healthy. He had a lot of respect for me because I'd quit school in Montrose the year before and was now doing a man's work on the ranch; but I was still his kid and he was still the man who, with Mom, had wrested inch by inch the ranch from Montana wilderness.

I dropped the roan down a rocky trail and spent an hour trying to cut sign by riding in widening circles, bent over with my eyes on the ground. Then a man came walking between two of the big boulders with a mule colt in his arms and I jerked up the roan.

The man was a Chinese. I don't know how old he was; I never found out, though my guess would be about thirty years of age. He wore an old cap, a shiny black silk shirt whose tail, I suspected, was pretty long, a pair of levis, and a pair of moccasins the Indians made and peddled week-ends in Montrose. Most Chinese in those days wore their hair in two long, dirty queues braided down their backs and living in terror that some drunk cow puncher would cut them off. So about the first thing I noticed when I recovered from surprise was that this one didn't have a braid. His hair was cut short, man style. Maybe because of the bandage around it.

HE WAS quite powerful in build but the colt was heavy enough to make him weave a little, and I kind of had to

admire him for the manner in which he apparently had found it alone and was doggedly carrying it three miles toward the ranch.

The mule colt itself was about done in. It was so weak and skinny its body was all ears and head and legs, the ribs sticking out pitifully. When I gigged the roan forward again the Chinese stopped and very carefully lowered his burden to the ground. He straightened and smiled a half shy smile, touching his cap. He had an open, friendly face with skin so smooth it shone. I wondered about the light bandage.

"How do," he said politely. "My name is Quong."

"I'm Jim Devers," I replied, trying to make it sound important and grown up. "Where'd you find the colt?"

He turned and pointed back along the trail. "Down there, around the corner, up above."

I worked the shying roan past the recumbent mule colt and rode on down about a hundred yards to where the rocks formed a kind of gully. Around the corner a trail led up between two big boulders and the first thing I saw, following the tracks of the Chinese where he came down with the colt in his arms, was a hoof sticking up in the air. The roan snorted uneasily and as I gigged him on up I saw the mare's other three feet in the air.

She was dead and had been for two or three days at least. She lay squarely on her back, wedged tight in a crevice that clamped her like a blacksmith's vise, all four feet up in the air, the flies already at her swollen, discolored udder with its two dark dugs. She had apparently foaled the colt up on higher ground among the rocks and trees, cleverly hiding it for a day or two before starting down to the floor of the ravine that led back to the ranch basin. But there had been rain, and marks showed where she had slipped and rolled over, off the glass smooth edge of the crevice and landed struggling on her back, trapped and unable to move. The baby mule colt had blindly gone in after her and had lain just at her head, neatly penned in by her body and the opposite end of the crevice twenty feet away.

I swung back aboard the uneasy roan gelding and rode back to the Chinese. He was squatting beside the weak, almost dead colt, stroking its skinny neck. He smiled again as I came up, touching his cap once more.

CHAPTER II

YOU didn't ask a man many personal questions in those days, even a "Chink," as they were called by most people. Some had come as railroad laborers and remained as proprietors of small laundries and cafes. We had one in Montrose, called by everybody only by the name of Ching, who ran a small cafe where the riders often ate; a very old and wrinkled man who specialized in sourdough flapjacks for breakfasts. Others had drifted east from Seattle and Portland and been swallowed up by the cow and railroad towns through Oregon and Montana and the Dakotas.

But this Quong was different; and though I was bursting with youthful curiosity to find out how he happened to be plodding across country alone on foot, Dad's stern lessons in cow country etiquette held back the words. I know that the first chuck wagon meal I ever ate as "assistant" wrangler, over with another outfit Dad was helping with the roundup that year, had some peach cobbler dessert to top off the noon meal of beef, beans, potatoes, and Dutch oven biscuits. I was twelve, growing like a cottonwood tree, and perennially hungry from morning until

night; and I made the mistake of going in for a second helping of the cobbler. I'd hardly got the spoon going when Dad's hand was on my arm. "Some of the others might want some too, son," he had said.

Nothing more than that. It was enough. I understood.

Range etiquette, it was; and that same code of ethics and manners that gave every man a fair share of the "chuck" also forbade asking another man anything about his personal affairs.

"You speak English all right?" I demanded of the Chinese.

"It and several other languages," he replied softly.

"Well, I don't think that colt will live," I told him, swinging the sidling roan over and spurring him on the off side to get him up close. "But you try to hand it up to me anyhow."

"It will not die," he answered, bending down and working his hands beneath its neck and rump.

"How do you know so much about mules?" I shot back.

"It will not die," he repeated and straightened with the limp animal dangling in his strong arms.

We had quite a time getting that blue mule colt up across the saddle in front of me, what with the roan snorting and nervously fighting the reins and me holding him down with spur and leather hard on the bit while I used the other hand to haul it up. On the ground the Chinese pushed and tried to stay with the plunging roan. But we finally made it . . . and the colt was, miraculously, still alive.

I began to wonder about that Chinese. . . .

WE SET off for the ranch with the Oriental walking beside the cow pony, the mule dangling lax in front of me. Quong strode easily, his steps free muscled and soft in the Indian moccasins. In town old Ching would, maybe once a week, slip out of his cafe and go up to the saloon where Andy Calders, our town constable and the only law in Montrose, tended bar. Ching always went with his hands in the sleeves of his black silk shirt. He shuffled up with the empty vanilla extract bottle in one sleeve and he shuffled back with the extract bottle full of whiskey tucked up the same sleeve. But he shuffled. Many times when Lenore and I rode in town mornings to pick up Ruth Rogers at her father's livery stable and go on to school together we'd seen Ching and ridden our ponies over to wave a greeting, hoping he'd take his hands from his sleeves and wave back. But Ching would only nod his queued head and smile and shuffle on.

And that was why this strange, small but powerfully built Chinese who spoke such perfect English awed me a little as we headed back to the ranch. By all the rules of the cow country he was a "Chink" and not worth a broken down cow, but about this one I thought differently. I liked him. I was hoping he would stay on the ranch for a couple of weeks.

It was about one o'clock in the afternoon when we made the ranch. Most of the seven hands already were back at work in the hay again, except Wes and Slim Holcomb. Their status was a little different, due to Wes having been with us over two years and Slim being a sort of unofficial bronk stomper who gentled unbroken geldings. The two of them were working on a broken hay rick close by the corral when we came up and Dad, a toothpick peeled from a match in his mouth, strolled down from the kitchen door.

Dad looked at Quong but didn't say anything as we stopped by the cor-

ral gate and the Chinese lowered the mule colt to the ground. It lay with legs sprawled, long ears dropping, its thin blue muzzle resting motionless in the dust. There was no sign of life now, not even in the movement of its ribs.

"Where'd you find it?" asked Dad.

"I didn't," I said. "He did," indicating Quong. "He was packing it toward the ranch in his arms."

I went on to explain about the mare slipping off the ledge and landing on her back in the crevice to die there, wedged in tight. Wes and Slim had left the hay rick and come over, curious.

"Dog-gone," Wes Allen grinned at his close friend Slim. "We got us a Chinee puncher who's also a mule nurse."

"Why didn't you knock it on the head?" Dad half grunted, his eyes on the motionless colt.

"I probably would have," I told him, "but he sorta had the idea it would live. He seemed pretty certain of it."

Dad looked the Chinese over contemptuously and then ignored him. "Better knock it on the head, son," he advised. "It's too far gone and we haven't got time to fool around with a dogie colt, now that it's mother's dead. Drag it over back of the woodpile and knock its brains out with the ax."

"No, please," the Chinese suddenly spoke up, touching his cap respectfully. "Don't kill. I take care of him. Please, Mister."

"Knock it on the head," Dad repeated to me, harshly. His face had enough of a flush in it that I knew he'd been pulling on the bottle in his room all morning. That was what had me worried. When Lenore and I had been little kids around the ranch and mother with us, Dad could be expected to go on a good one about once a month, either at the Saturday night dances in town or maybe just get to drinking with the boys and Andy Calders over at the bar where Andy worked. Sometimes we'd all drive home in the light wagon with Lenore and me giggling in the back while Dad roared and sang and Mom got half mad because he wouldn't let her handle the team. Most of the time she had just laughed at him, knowing that the next morning he'd get up at the usual time and go to work and maybe not touch even a small drink for a couple of weeks. So that was why Dad's steady drinking and brooding in his room had me worried. I'd had at one time the idea of going to a college somewhere and learning the cow business from the scientific end, mixing book learning with what Dad had taught me on the ranch, but his drinking and brooding over Mom had ended that; had, in fact, been the main reason why I quit school at fourteen, in the seventh grade.

"Lenore's got a nipple and milk bottle around here someplace that she used on that pet lamb last year," I ventured to Dad, getting hit kind of hard by the look in the eyes of the Chinese. "Maybe we could—"

"Maybe we couldn't either, Jim," Dad cut in coldly. "I said knock its brains out and I mean exactly that with no back talk. We haven't got any time to fool with an animal on this place that'll probably be stunted anyhow, now that it hasn't had its mammy's milk in four or five days."

THE Chinese removed his cap, holding it tight in his two hands. "My name is Quong," he said to Dad. "If you don't kill that baby mule—"

But Dad already had turned on his heel, and I knew the argument was ended. He had said no and he meant just that. My stomach sank; and then I saw Lenore.

Lenore was seventeen at that time,

two years older than myself. She was brown haired and slim, with green eyes that made her just about the prettiest thing in that part of the cow country. She knew it, of course, and could be quite a lot on the hell-cat side when she cared to. She flirted outrageously at the dances and picnics in town and wasn't at all averse to let her current "fellow" kiss her a bit—particularly if she had deliberately taken him away from one of the other girls, usually out of pure spite. There just wasn't a man around who could resist her. Every cowhand around was mooning over her, mostly from a distance because Dad had some pretty set ideas about *that,* too. He said she wasn't going to throw herself away on some sixty dollar a month rider unless it was over his dead body. A couple of our own men had got it over her pretty badly and made the mistake of paying open court They had promptly been sent packing, fired on the spot. I knew that Wes was crazy about her and had been for two years. I could see it every time he was around. I think Dad might have suspected it too, for he was a pretty hard man to fool; but he liked Wes a lot, except when Wes got drunk and into fights, and didn't maybe try too hard to see what was going on. Wes had, in fact, stolen an old tintype of her and me, taken the year before in front of where Andy worked, she sixteen and me two years younger, towering above her because of my gangling height.

But she was the one person around the ranch or in town who was not afraid of Dad. She kept a neat house for him because Mom had taught her such things. She took care of the washing and ironing of his clothes and cooked his meals; so she could say things to him that would have got me skinned alive. Many times at a dance I'd seen her, standing outside and letting her current fellow make love to her, rip into Dad hell for leather when he broke it up and made her come back inside.

She saw the mule colt on the ground and she saw Quong, cap still in his fingers.

"Who's he?" she asked.

That gave me a chance to tell her about the mare dying and the colt being almost dead from thirst and food—adding in just the right way that Dad was ordering me to drag it over to the woodpile and knock in its head with an ax.

She wheeled on Dad, and I could have kissed her then, much as I cursed and yelled and fought her off when she tried to kiss me. I was a grown up man now, at fifteen, and figured that any man who had real salt in his craw wouldn't let any woman, no matter how pretty, mush around in his face.

"You'll do no such thing," she declared flatly to Dad. "You hear me? You won't kill that mule colt."

Dad had turned around again and he now ignored her the same way he had ignored Quong. "You heard what I said, Jim. Get busy and get that thing away from the ranch."

"You just try making him kill that colt," Lenore cried firmly, "and I swear on mother's tombstone that I'll never wash you another shirt or cook another meal or sweep the floor of your bedroom—"

"All right, all right, Goddammit!" Dad suddenly yelled, throwing up both hands in angry resignation. "You and your Chink friend can keep the blasted thing." He turned on the Chinese, levelling a long forefinger. "All right, you. You work here, sabbe? You chop wood, help cook, work all day. Sleep in chop-chop barn. Ten dolla month pay. One, two, three, four, five—" counting on his fingers to insure that there would be no misunderstanding—"six, seven,

eight, nine, ten. Ten dolla one month. You sabbe?"

Quong gave a slight bow, his face all poker. "Ten dolla. One month. I sabbe."

He looked at Lenore and though his almond shaped dark eyes were expressionless, I knew that there was gratitude in them. Beginning in that moment, I think, Quong worshipped her from then on.

I swung from the sidling roan. "Come along, Quong, and bring the colt. I'll show you where to put him."

"Put him in the end stall on those grain sacks, over in the stable," Lenore directed. "I'm going over and warm up some milk."

QUONG bent and got the mule in his arms, and once more I marvelled at the tremendous strength that must lie in his small body. I opened the big pole gate of the horse corral and we went across the lot. Dad had built a stable at one end of the main barn and now kept a couple of his own saddle horses in the stalls. He didn't do much riding work anymore but rode into town pretty often. In one of the stalls, unused, were a few old horse collars, bits of harness, and a dozen odds and ends of leather. We got the mule bedded down on the sacks and presently Lenore put in appearance from the kitchen. She carried a stewer of warm milk and a milk bottle with nipple. The coyotes had got the lamb a few weeks after she'd weaned it from the bottle.

The blue mule colt was too far gone to swallow much, though it began to show slobbering signs of life when the first of the milk got into its mouth. I kept rubbing its dry throat to help the swallowing muscles. We got some of the milk down and then let up on the feeding for awhile. I was afraid too much food all of a sudden might kill it. Lenore told Quong to keep the stewer in the stall in order for him to get more warm milk from the milking shed morning and evenings.

"What are you going to name her?" she asked, when we were done and the mule colt lay stretched out on its side, still too weak to hold up its big head.

He removed his cap, bowing a little. He grinned for the first time since we'd got back to the ranch. "Perhaps you would name him, Miss?" he suggested.

Lenore wrinkled up her pretty nose cogitatively, finger stroking her chin in mock seriousness. "It's not a him, it's a her. Hmmm . . . how about Susie?"

So Susie it became. Just like that.

CHAPTER III

SHE went back to the kitchen and I unsaddled the roan and then took Quong over to the bunkhouse to get us something to eat and to introduce him to Harley Role. Harley was an old time ex-sheriff who had seen better days until whiskey reduced him to that of a ranch cook on a small outfit. He was nearing seventy then and a pretty easy going old timer, not belligerent like a lot of cooks were. I was a little uneasy about how him and the other boys were going to take Quong, so I introduced the Chinese as my new pardner and Quong shyly stuck out his hand. They shook. Harley's eyes flicked to the bandage Quong wore.

"Glad to meet you, Quong," Harley said. "You fellows hungry?"

"Quong's going to help you around the kitchen and work about the place for awhile," I said, "and then I'm going to make a cow hand out of him. What's left over from dinner?"

"I'd like to see that," the old man grinned. "A Chinee bronk buster, hey? I got some roast and boiled potatoes

and pie. I'll heat up the coffee too. Like a cup myself."

He went over and stirred up the fire while the Chinese and I went outside to the wash bench and cleaned up a little. By the time we got through Harley had set out plates and the warmed over food. He sipped noisily at a cup of scalding black coffee while we ate.

"When are you going to trade me those old guns of yourn, Harley?" I asked, between bites.

The guns were two old 44-40's that once had been cap-and-balls. Harley had worn them in his early peace officer days until a gunsmith remodeled the chambers to take center fire metallic cartridges. They had been hanging on a nail above the old man's bunk for more than a year. Few of our hands ever packed hardware, but there were a lot of big jackrabbits everywhere and it was a lot of sport to try and knock one down when it jumped up in front of a horse and started loping away. Harley had, however, refused to part with the beloved weapons he'd worn for so many years.

He put down his cup and wiped his lips with the flour sack apron around his gaunt middle.

"Well, I tell you, Jim," he said slowly. "Them old guns are about all I got left out of the past. I ain't got no family—never did have one. No relatives of any kind. Just them old friendly guns. I feel kinda good with 'em up on that wall above my bunk, like as how they're kinda lookin' out after me. So I reckon I wouldn't be partin' with 'em just yet. But I'll tell you what: I'll be goin' along one of these days, maybe before spring. Just a feelin' I've got. So when I go them old guns are yourn."

I had a fork loaded with potatoes half way to my mouth. I lowered it to scoff like any fifteen year old might. "You mean you had some kind of a warning that you're going to die?"

"I guess you'd call it that," old Harley replied, his face getting stubborn. He was plainly piqued at my disdain.

I turned to Quong. "Do you think a man could—"

"Yes," Quong said quietly.

"Huh?"

"He knows," the Chinese said and lowered his face to his plate again.

Heathen philosophy, I thought, making a mental note that Lenore ought to change that bandage.

AFTER the meal I hunted up some extra blankets and helped him to carry them over to the stall. He spent the afternoon cleaning out the place and carrying straw for his bed. We fed Susie twice more.

That blue mule colt picked up amazingly during the next week. In no time at all it was out in the warm sun in the corral, and a couple of times it let out weak squeals and tried a turn or two at bucking. We were full in the middle of haying now, all seven hands except old Harley throwing up big stacks that would help to carry us through the winter. When the snow got real deep and foraging tough for the cows we'd start feeding.

Quong moved about the place, silent and efficient. Harley would do anything for him, probably because Quong had believed him when the old man said he was going to die before spring. He took his meals with us in the bunkhouse kitchen, eating alone at a small table beside the stove. Wes and the others were pretty standoffish at first, but finally got around to calling him Chinkie, which I didn't like. I was old enough to know that calling a Chinese a Chink was about the same as calling an Italian a Bohunk. Ruth Rogers had taught me that with a hard pull on the ear when we'd been in the third grade

with a little Chinese boy several years before.

As for Quong, he was the quickest man to catch on that I ever saw. There wasn't much of anything he couldn't do. He helped grateful old Harley with the meals and dish washing, gave a hand with the milking after I showed him how, took care of Lenore's garden back of the kitchen, and a dozen other things. The boys were not long in finding out that he was a wizard with a sewing needle and hot iron on shirts. From that moment on he was no longer a Chink. He was Quong and one of them. They paid him generously and even Lenore began bringing him Dad's shirts and pants and asking him to help her with the work up at the house.

Dad, however, was a hard man to convince. He was, I think, a little angry and disappointed that the blue mule colt was now getting sleek and bouncing around the corral like a rubber ball on legs . . . particularly because Lenore was so fond of Quong she had begun to hoo-raw Dad unmercifully about the colt not dying. As for Quong being upset at Dad's attitude, he never appeared to notice. He went his silent, efficient way, washing dishes after meals, keeping old Harley's kitchen stove wood box stacked high with dry fuel, and giving Lenore a hand making beds and scrubbing floors.

That was one thing about Lenore: she was a lovely hellcat in many ways, she was vain, she callously led one fellow after another merry chases at the dances in town while Wes got angrily jealous—but she wasn't lazy. She made a good home for Dad and did a lot of work in the garden, close by the old sod covered dugout which had been his and Mom's first home.

Quong worked in the garden with her quite a lot. He seemed to be almost a part of the earth itself, and I kept wondering how he'd been so positive that Susie would not die and just as positive that old Harley would die before spring. He had big hands for a Chinese, with long powerful fingers, and I already knew from the way he had set out to carry Susie three miles to the ranch in his arms that he was as strong and quick as a two year old bull. I used to see him squatting down on his haunches in the garden, sharp trowel working around the carrots, as though each one was a personal friend; and once he picked up a small handful of the dark, fertile earth and let it trickle through his fingers. "Us," he said softly, half to himself, and picked up the dirt once more. "Us again," he murmured, holding it in his brown palm. Chinese philosophy, I thought. . . .

LENORE was fascinated by him. It got to where she wanted Quong with her all the time he wasn't busy elsewhere around the ranch. There wasn't any physical attraction involved at all. It was because we'd spent our lives in a small world encompassing the ranch and Montrose and Hoogan, the county seat, eight miles east, and Quong had come out of a bigger outer world. The strange part of it was that he never told her much about the China where he was born. He always spoke of the "other world" and "other life" of two thousand years before. He must have done a lot of research on the subject, for he always spoke as though he had *lived* in that other world. I used to come upon the two of them in the garden, Quong down on his haunches with the trowel and Lenore standing close by, listening in fascination to his low voice as he related strange stories and legends about how people lived in those ancient days. She was living those days herself and got so interested that Wes began to get sore.

He finally got mad one day out in the milk house built on the east side of the kitchen and accused her of liking the damned Chink better than she did him. That left him wide open.

"Oh, yes?" she said, her green eyes tantalizing. "And just who said that I *do* like you, Mister Wesley Allen? And do you really like me, you silly little boy?"

I was in the kitchen, having an afternoon cup of coffee and could see her through the doorway. Dad was in town —or otherwise even Wes wouldn't have been hanging around the house.

"You know damned well I like you . . . plenty," I heard him growl sullenly. He was always sullen when they quarreled. "I'm crazy about you, honey, and you know it."

He moved into view and tried to take her in his arms. She let him—just enough that he couldn't quite kiss her. She held him off at arms' length, pretty head cocked tauntingly, her green eyes flashing in the excitement of a game at which she always came out winner.

"Then if you're so crazy about me, Wesley Allen, how come you had so many dances with Ruth last Saturday night?"

He fought and tried to kiss her again, but Lenore knew every trick in the bag. She ducked away out the side door and ran squealing and laughing toward the corral where Quong was currying Susie's rough colt coat; and Wes came on into the kitchen glowering.

"One of these days," he growled angrily, "there's going to be a Chink turn up here with a broken neck."

"One of these days," I told him, "you'd better get it out of your head that my sister would let anything more than friendship be between her and Quong, Wes."

"Aw, hell, kid, I didn't mean it that way. It's just that she—well, dammit, Jim, she can just drive a man clean crazy, that's all."

"That's between you and her, Wes. But leave Quong out of it. He's my pardner and nobody around this ranch, you or anybody else, is going to step on him. He said Susie wasn't going to die and you can go out and take a look at that mule. I never told anybody before but he said something about old Harley that I ain't mentioning but has got me wondering plenty. I don't know where he came from or why and I ain't asking him. All I know is that Dad is spending too much time in town drinking and playing poker, Lenore is getting to be more of a flirt every day, and that with me growing up the Devers family is beginning to drift apart. So maybe I'm a little more than glad to have Quong around."

I felt kind of like a fool, talking that way; but the words just seemed to slip out of their own accord. A kid of fifteen can see a lot of things that other people don't seem to notice and I was worried. That's why every so often, when I was a little moody, I'd saddle up late evenings and ride in to the cemetery in Montrose to sit down on Mom's grave and have a talk with her. Dad and Lenore never suspected, nor did I confide in Quong either. He went his busy way around the ranch and showered attention upon Susie.

CHAPTER IV

YOU wouldn't have known that mule colt at the end of the first month. Susie's back was higher than a man's waist now, the milk Quong fed her working wonders. She drank from a pail and the ribs had disappeared beneath fur covered fat. She was turning color, to a lighter blue, after her sire, and her long ears stood up straight and firm. We still had to keep her

penned up away from the other stock because, with no mother to protect her, the grown stuff would have run her down and killed her at the drop of a hat. But she followed Quong around like a pet pup, and the moment his familiar black shirted figure entered the corral she'd come trotting. He talked to her in soft Chinese, Manchu dialect, I think, and the little blue devil seemed to understand some of what he was saying. The two of them still slept out in the stall, with Susie on her pallet of grain sacks and Quong on his straw mattress beside her.

Fall came early that year, the frost killing the green tops of the things growing in Lenore's garden back of the house. She and Quong went to work over big pans in the kitchen, cooking and canning everything for storage in the old dugout. By then Quong had moved his bunk in with us and ate at the same table as one of the boys. I liked living with them better than up at the house with Dad and Lenore, partly because Dad was hitting the bottle heavier all the time, brooding over Mom, and being pretty hard to get along with. I was growing by leaps and filling out some; and it got to where the boys, realizing Dad's frame of mind, turned to me more and more for instructions about the work. Occasionally I'd do something he didn't agree with and he'd get pretty sharp about it.

It was going to be only a matter of time until we clashed out in the open. The Devers family was beginning to break up. Something was in the wind. It was in Dad's drinking and gambling in town, in Lenore's flashing green eyes, in my pleasure at living with Quong and the others in the bunkhouse instead of up at the big ranch home fifty yards distant.

Dad had made no objection to this last named. He wanted me to learn the business from the ground up, realizing, perhaps, that in a few more years I'd be running the place anyhow while he drank out his last days. He knew I was slipping off to town occasionally with Wes Allen and the other boys, expect Slim, for a couple of drinks and other pleasure in a house run by two enterprising girls named Billie and Elsie. I'd heard sly hints, accompanied by knowing grins, that Dad himself went down there occasionally.

So I lived on with the boys, knowing the break was coming and dreading it, and I seemed to draw a little closer to Quong. He was picking up range lingo fast. He left off certain words of his careful English to call a horse a hoss, or a broom tail, a six shooter a Colt or Smith, and once, out in the milking shed, when a sow kicked him, he got up with his one legged stool still strapped to his middle and called her a saddle-colored, ornery polecat.

Nobody in the world loves rough horse play better than a hard working cow puncher. It was his one way, besides drinking, of letting off steam. So it was kind of natural that Wes Allen and Slim and the others played a lot of jokes on Quong. With biting cold coming down nights, ranch life meant dull routine in the bunk room at nightly poker sessions that soon grew tiresome; so poor Quong never knew what to expect next. They put burrs in his blankets, tied cowbells under his bunk, and one night when he came home late from Montrose after a visit with old Ching he found Susie snug and quite comfortably hog-tied—and very sound asleep—in his blankets while muffled roars of laughter shook the log walls. We took rotation turns getting up in the morning's biting cold and building a fire to warm up the room before the others had to roll out, and you could almost bet that Wes and Slim would lie awake half

the night in order to get up and tie hard knots in Quong's pants. It was funny to stay warm and snug under the blankets while poor Quong got up shiveringly and tried to undo the knots in his pants. I never found out until many years later that Manchuria could be a pretty cold place and that Quong was better innured to the winters than were we.

HE TOOK it all good naturedly and because of it the jokes soon lost their zest. He was one of us now, and heaven help the next new hand who showed up on Dad's payroll.

We made the roundup that fall, not using any chuck wagon because all of Dad's north range was under fence and Slim was going to start on the south side. So we worked all the stuff up close to the ranch and did the cutting out there, turning back the stockers for winter feeding and driving the shippers into the loading pens in town. Dad was one cowman who, despite unlimited open range everywhere, preferred to run a small, compact spread. Unlike Ike McCauley and Joe Hodge, over north of us, he had no desire to expand and build up big herds.

We drove a couple of hundred head of good shippers in town that fall, Quong riding a gentle cow pony but doing a pretty fair job at that. A couple of the hands got drunk while we were working in town at the pens and Dad fired them on the spot. It was all right for him, as the owner, to drink and brood over Mom, but he wouldn't countenance any hand taking on so much liquor that he couldn't earn his pay.

I saw the two, pay off money in their pockets, go back down the street that morning and went over to Dad, standing beside the loading incline. "That's going to throw us short, Dad," I said.

His own breath reeked with whiskey. He'd been down all morning at Andy's place having a few with the boys. It was getting to where you could smell it on him a good deal of the time. But there was one thing to his credit: he didn't as yet get real pie-eyed, like he had done on occasion in the old days when Mom was still with us. He simply drank and, later went off by himself and brooded. Lenore wanted him to get married again. She was woman enough to know that when a man lives too much alone he somehow shrivels up inside; and a man just wasn't meant to live that way. Dad, however, would have none of it. I guess he was still loyal enough to Mom's memory to figure that he didn't have any right to bring some strange woman into the house Mom had worked so hard and so many years to help him build.

"We've got to have some more help, Dad," I insisted that morning.

"Then give that Chink friend of yourn a prod pole and put him up on top of the chutes!" he snapped and went off down town to Andy's place again.

He came back an hour later with two new men I'd never seen before. One was short and pudgy and pretty bald, about thirty-eight years of age. The other was a very tall blonde fellow who was a good fifteen years younger than his companion. They looked like another pair of drifting saddle tramps hunting around for a good winter job not involving too much work. I didn't like them from the first.

WHEN Dad came up with the two men Quong and I had just put the twenty-fifth and last steer into a cattle car and closed the doors, the two of us working at the latch with the brakeman standing by to give final instructions. He signalled the engineer sitting idly

in his cab beyond a wagon crossing and the engineer backed up lazily in answer to the spotting, letting the couplings bump clashily. The loaded car rolled past, dragging another empty after it, and as the brakeman broke the two to clear the crossing again Quong jumped down beside me from the chute. He still wore his black silk shirt and levis, but he'd added a pair of very small hand made boots and a flat brimmed western hat. He was learning things fast.

"Jim," Dad said, nodding toward the two newcomers, "this tall gent is Luke Osborn and the short one is Joe Docker. This is my son Jim and this is Quong, who works out at the ranch. Luke and Joe will help us finish loading, Jim, and then go back to the ranch in the wagon. You see that their stuff is carried out. It's down back of the bar at Andy's."

I shook hands with them and Quong stuck out his hand too; but the taller one, Luke Osborn, didn't appear to notice. He said to me, "Well, what do you know? A Goddamned Chink cow puncher. I reckon I've about seen everything now, Joe. He live in the bunkhouse, bud?"

"That "bud" business always had steamed me but I held down my temper. "Quong lives in the bunkhouse with the rest of us," I said.

"You must have one hell of a ranch, Ed," Luke grunted to Dad, half serious. "Where we supposed to start in?"

"You go over in that second pen," Dad said. "That rider on the claybank is Slim Holcomb. He'll get you lined out. You coming down town, son?"

"I'll stick around for awhile," I said. "I got a little business to attend to."

He was high enough on the whiskey to grin a little, particularly now that the stock was about loaded and the buyer's money ready to bank. "Billie's, eh? Getting to be a regular rip snorter with the ladies and just turned sixteen!"

He laughed again and went away. Luke Osborn and Joe Docker were climbing the first fence with Wes Allen, over at another loading chute, watching the two. Maybe, I thought, Wes didn't go for the new men either or the way that Luke was packing a gun.

"I'm going to make a visit," I told Quong. "I'll be back in a half an hour or so."

"Okay, Jim. I'll go over and work with Wes at the other chute."

He said it kind of absently, because his eyes were following the tall back of a man who had referred to him as a Goddamned Chink cow puncher.

I mounted my horse and jogged out to the cemetery to spend a few minutes with Mom.

We prodded the last steer of the two hundred shippers, some of which we'd bought from Ike McCauley the previous winter when his feed ran short, into the eighth car about four o'clock that afternoon. Wes and Slim slammed the latch on the sliding doors and stepped back, wiping their sweat covered, dirty faces. Wes let go a final kick at the side of the car from where he stood on the chute's platform. "Happy little journey to cow heaven, blast your red hides! If I take that trip to Chicago sometime and they happen to serve me a steak off one of your damned rumps, I'll know it the first bite. Come on, Slim, let's go cut this dust out of our throats down at Andy's. Mine's as raw as a fresh hide."

"I'll sure have a go with you on that, muh prod polin' friend," Slim said in his easy way and unconsciously brushed at the dust on the sleeve of his expensive shirt. Slim dressed fastidiously at all times and wore nothing but the best. Nor was he ever too tired and sleepy, coming in late from a dance, to care-

fully brush and hang up his clothes. "But two are m' limit, like always. And you better make it the same, Wes. Lenore's in town and if she sees you lit up she'll get sore."

The other boys had finished closing all the gates of the now empty loading pens and we all went over to where Dad was standing with the two new men. Dad's eyes were on the eight loaded cattle cars now creeping slowly down toward the switch beyond the station. There was a freight due in about dark and the eight would be hooked on, the buyer's two men riding in the caboose to take care of the shippers until they arrived in Chicago. The two hundred had seen the last of us.

"You boys can all stay in town for awhile, if you want to," Dad said. "Luke, Jim here will see that you boys' stuff gets loaded in Art's wagon. He's going to stick around till about dark, so that'll give you and Joe enough time for a few hands of poker over at Andy's. I'm going to get back that twenty-six dollars you won off me the past week."

Luke Osborn grinned and nodded obligingly. He had just begun growing himself a blonde mustache and the hairy stubble above his upper lip gave the grin a fishiness I didn't like. He looked a lot older than his twenty-three or so years.

CHAPTER V

WE ALL went back to the ranch and the two new men soon fell into place, but it was noticeable that none of the boys played any jokes on the newcomers. I disliked Osborn more than ever on account of him packing a gun all the time. None of the others carried hardware around the ranch and seldom in town. There just wasn't any reason for it. Wes had an old gun down in his war bag and old Harley's two 44-40's still hung in their sheaths on the wall above his bunk.

So when Luke kept on lounging around the place with a pistol slung at one hip I went up to the house to see Dad. He was at his usual evening place before the hearth in the south wing living room, staring moodily, a glass and bottle on the table beside him. I told him about Luke and that he ought to fire him.

"Quong's getting to be a pretty good hand now," I said. "We can run the place without Luke and Joe. There's just no call for Luke to keep that cannon on even when he sits down to eat."

"Anybody said anything?" he asked. "Any trouble among the boys?"

I had to admit there wasn't. "But the boys don't like it," I added, "and I don't like the contemptuous way he treats Quong."

"That's too bad about that Chinese crony of yourn," he said a little coldly. "I played a few hands of poker with Luke in town for a couple of weeks before I hired him and Joe. He seemed all right to me. A lot more than that Chink friend of yourn."

"Quong's earning his money many times over," Lenore put in sharply. "I like Quong. I don't like that Osborn fellow either, Dad. At least Quong keeps his place around me and Luke is just a little too darned familiar to suit me—"

"Luke stays as long as he does his work," Dad cut in in a tone of finality. "As for his packing a gun, if he wants to load himself down with hardware and be uncomfortable doing it, that's his business. I ask no questions of any man I hire . . . including Quong. It's not a man's right. Perhaps Luke is on the dodge. I neither know nor care as long as he does his work."

There couldn't be any question about Luke and Joe not doing their work.

They were good hands. We had a lot of feeding to do that winter on sled runners pulled by a team, loading the hay ricks from the big stacks we'd put up when Quong first came to the ranch; and a lot of punchers, summer wages in their pockets, just didn't cater to the idea. It was too easy to loaf in town in a warm hotel and not have to get up at daylight in below zero weather.

But Luke and Joe didn't seem to mind at all. They each took turns rolling out to build fires in both the bunk room and kitchen, nor did they grumble when we had to bundle up in heavy mackinaws, gloves, and caps and lean against the wind to go out and chop the ice from the horse trough before breakfast and then pump fresh water for the work teams. It was so cold you had to hold a lighted match to the bit before putting it in a horse's mouth or otherwise the frost would have made the metal "bite" in and almost take off the hide.

So I couldn't figure Luke and his pardner out. Not until they began to sit in on the nightly poker sessions. After a while the truth dawned: Luke was managing to win just a little more one night than he lost the next night: he and Joe were a couple of tinhorn card sharps. Quong told me.

MOST of the cow outfits didn't have working cash during summer months, paying off in a lump sum after fall shipments and then each month until money ran short again; and all our other hands had a pretty good wad of dough on them. Thus Luke and Joe were making the outfit until they could clean it through slow and careful winnings at poker.

Wes and the others never suspected and I might not have either until the night my luck was running good and stakes were getting a little high—particularly since a quart Luke had brought back from town had made the rounds of the table about twice. Quong stood just back of me. For the past month Wes had been bedevilling him about learning how to play poker but the Chinese smilingly had shook his head. Now as I sat in the game, getting a little excited, Quong moved around far enough for his eyes to catch mine. I was reaching for a twenty dollar note to call Luke's raise but, on a hunch, regretfully threw in my hand and let Luke have the pot. He was holding four kings.

I dropped out of the game on the pretext of being broke and went into the kitchen. We were alone, Harley sitting in the bunkroom with chair propped back against the wall, smoking his long stemmed pipe and watching the progress of Luke's winnings. I looked a question at Quong and he smiled and shook his head again.

"No good, Jim," he said. "Don't play with him anymore."

"You mean Luke?"

"Luke and Joe, too. They are not playing honestly."

"And just how do *you* know?" I demanded.

The small table he first had used to take his meals was still beside the stove. He shoved back a couple of pans, seated himself before it, and took a deck of new cards from the pocket of his black silk shirt. He broke the seal while I stared. I'd never dreamed he even knew what a card looked like. From the doorway and bunk room floated low laughter, oaths of disgust, gibes, and the smell of hazy smoke. The boys were absorbed in their game . . . and losing to Luke. Joe was, I had noticed, losing steadily to Luke too.

Quong rifled the new deck expertly, the cards giving off a hard burring sound. He picked up the top card,

which happened to be the ten of diamonds. He smilingly held it up, slid it into the deck, shuffled again, and cut. He shuffled again and I cut. The ten of diamonds was buried somewhere among the fifty-one others. Quong started dealing them off, face down. He dealt with one hand only, the paste boards sliding off mechanically under a brown thumb. It was amazing to watch him. It was more amazing when he finally came to a certain card and asked me to pick it up. I turned it over: the ten of diamonds.

"Marked?" I breathed out excitedly in a low voice.

"Yes," he nodded. "There are many ways I can mark them while shuffling."

Then he grinned again and put the deck back into his shirt pocket. So this was the poor Chinese ranch flunkey that Wes had been bedevilling about learning to play poker!

The knowledge that Luke and Joe were playing crooked cards put me on a spot. I could easily have exposed the two and got Quong to back me up. Could proof have been furnished, Dad would have fired them on the spot and ordered both off the ranch. But positive proof was lacking. What really bothered me was that Luke was a mean man and packing a gun, in violation of good bunk house etiquette. Chances were that had I made the accusation Luke would pull his pistol and shoot the unarmed Chinese in a moment's time. Wes would certainly crawl him, for Wes was a hot head of the worst kind; and Wes wasn't packing his gun. It was down in his war bag.

I thought things over for a couple of days and finally shrugged the whole thing off. I figured, Hell, they're grown up. They can look after themselves.

I hung around the table during the following week, though, waiting impatiently for Quong to start playing and clean out Luke; but it didn't happen.

THEY did, however, finally inveigle him into a game so they could "teach" him the rules and meaning of the various cards. Quong sat watching closely and nodding understandingly when Wes showed him how to shuffle the deck. The new student shuffled fumblingly, four or five of the cards sailing off onto the floor. On the third pot Wes had three fives in sight at stud while Quong had only an ace and not much of anything else. But the way he kept on betting it was obvious he had a second ace in the hole, naively believing that his two aces would beat Wes's three fives.

Wes raked in his winnings with a whoop of laughter and Quong grinned and said, "Very bad mistake I make, Wes. Next time I remember. I catch on pretty soon."

He caught on pretty soon. In a couple of weeks he was holding his own to the extent of winning back most of what he had lost for "lessons." In fact, the scramble among the boys to teach him poker suddenly subsided along with their enthusiasm.

I was out of the games now, hovering over the table back of Quong's chair and waiting for him to cut loose on Luke. Quong did win a little from the tin horn and a few times I saw Luke a little uncertain and glowering. I think he was wondering how it came about that when he made a crooked deal on a big pot Quong always seemed to have a poor hand not worth backing up.

"You're picking up damned fast for a beginner," Luke Osborn grunted one night when Quong took two straight eight dollar pots off him with an apology about beginner's luck.

"Chinese always learn gambling

fast," Quong murmured, eyes on his cards. "And you and Joe and Wes are very good teachers."

But I knew the winnings had been on the level. The Chinese was too clever to expose his skill. Luke probably was a poor loser to a man he'd instinctively hated since the very beginning, that day at the loading pens in town.

"Aw, hell, Luke," Wes Allen hoorawed, picking up the deck for the deal. "What are *you* squawking about, I'd like to know? You're ahead of the game—you got about a hundred and fifteen dollars of my money as I knows of."

"Plus about forty-five or fifty of mine, m' squawkin' friend," added Slim with a grin. Slim was a little more on the conservative side than Wes, who was a plunger. Unless something happened, I knew Wes would be flat broke again in another week or so. The games had been gaining momentum the past few nights. Even Dad had come down for a couple of sessions, breaking a rule of his not to hang around the bunk house with his men.

So I waited for Quong to cut loose on Luke, and it almost broke my heart the day they drew their time and headed for town with more than eight hundred dollars winnings. They rode off across the white blanketed, frozen basin, Wes going in with them to bring back the horses. Or so that was his excuse for volunteering to make the two and a half mile cold ride. I knew better. Wes was beginning to hit the bottle pretty heavily himself and I was pretty certain that he preferred to do his drinking in the house down on the edge of town where Billie and Elsie lived.

He and Lenore weren't getting along so good.

I watched the three of them ride off, then went after Quong out in the stable, fashioning a new blanket for Susie. She was outgrowing the first one he'd made for her, the belly straps becoming too short. She stood patiently like a milliner's model and I was almost mad enough to quarrel with him.

"Why didn't you clean those skunks?" I demanded angrily. "You knew they were working signals and marking the edges of the decks. Wes lost three hundred and sixty dollars alone, not to mention Slim and the others. You could have got their money back at least."

"And perhaps got somebody shot too, Jim," he answered. "But I wouldn't worry about it, Jim. I heard Luke say that they were going into business in Montrose for the winter because the 'pickings' would be good. But suppose they didn't? Is money so important?"

He was punching a hole through leather and inserting a copper rivet to be squeezed down hard.

"We ain't out in this cold every morning at daylight just for the fun of it," I said, working the pinchers. "And, come to think of it, just how come you're staying on at sixty a month, working out in snow storms?"

"Because," he said softly, examining the rivet, "money isn't important."

"Just why did you come then, Quong?" I asked.

HE STRAIGHTENED and looked at me across Susie's back. He had been bent down almost under her sleek belly, fitting the straps. He rested a brown hand on her mane and looked at me. Something that was unreadable lay in his almond-shaped eyes.

"Do you believe in reincarnation, Jim?" he asked.

"If you mean do I think people go to heaven when they die, Mom was pretty sure that the good ones do. She

taught Lenore and me that."

"That's reincarnation of the spirit. You western people do believe that very strongly. Your mother was undoubtedly certain of it, Jim."

"Well?"

"There must be a purpose back of all things. Sometimes we Chinese have beliefs that we too back by a strong faith. It has to fit into a pattern somewhere. Everything is done for a purpose. Do you follow me?"

"No," I grunted shortly. "I ain't got the least idea what you're talking about."

"Then let us mention it no more, Jim. But perhaps someday I can explain."

So the affairs of the ranch went on that winter. It was one of the bitterest Montana had seen in many seasons and we had our hands full. Quong and I worked side by side day after day. He was rapidly turning into a good ranch hand. We were "pardners" now and, in certain things, shared no confidences with the others. And yet Quong puzzled me. He puzzled me by being almost westernized in the cow country sense of the word and then, sometimes when we were alone, speaking of things that had no meaning; at least not for me.

So one day while we were repairing a stretch of pole fence I asked him point blank where he had come from that day he appeared on the spread. His answer came gently, almost reverently, "You mean the day I found Susie?"

"The day you found Susie?"

"I didn't find her, Jim. I knew she was there all the time. I just walked up from below and got her."

"How did you know she was there?" I demanded incredulously, for he was my pardner and he wouldn't be lying.

He hesitated a moment before answering, removing his cap to scratch his head. The scar around back of the left ear gleamed white through his neatly trimmed black hair. "I don't know, Jim. Well . . . I know but I couldn't explain. All I can tell you is that I knew she was there and when I picked her up I knew where the ranch was. I'd never been there but I knew where it was."

I couldn't get it through my head. I thought about it, hard, while trimming the big end of the pole enough that the spikes would go through. While he picked up the twenty foot pole I tossed the ax into the snow and nailed on the rail.

"You don't believe me, do you, Jim?" he finally asked.

"Sure, I believe you, old timer. I'd take your word against that of any man alive and believe you as quick as I would Dad. It's just that I must be pretty ignorant not to be able to understand. Where did you come from *before* you found Susie?"

"Frankly, Jim, you *wouldn't* believe me if I told you. So I won't. All I can tell you is that my past life is a blank. I mean my boyhood. The rest . . . I can remember nothing. I know that I must have been born, this time, in Manchuria because the way I speak Manchu tells me it must be my native language. But as for the other I can remember nothing from the time I stood there looking down at Susie. Something led me to her. I don't know what, because everything back of that is darkness."

Well . . . all of a sudden it hit me. That scar back of his ear was the clue. Quong had suffered an accident of some kind and the blow had blotted out the past. He had come to walking aimlessly across our south range and had stumbled upon Susie and her dead mother. His almost flawless English, his skill with the cards, that was easy. He'd picked them up living in Seattle or San

Francisco and patronizing Chinese gambling clubs.

So if he wanted to believe that he had been reincarnated from two thousand years back and came to walking alone through Montana, that was all right with me, because he was my friend. But I knew better. Only one Indian in Montana made moccasins of the kind Quong had been wearing and that Indian was old Charley Two-Paint-Ponies in Montrose.

Quong might have come from a China of two thousand years before but he sure as the dickens had stopped off long enough to buy a pair of moccasins from Charley!

I felt a whole lot better.

CHAPTER VI

ONE night in late January Harley Role died, going just about the way he had felt that he would go. The old ex-sheriff went to bed a little earlier that evening than he was accustomed to turning in, complaining about being "a mite tired." I recalled that he lay there under the covers for two or three minutes and then I remembered seeing his eyes flick up to the old guns on the wall. He loved those old guns because they were all he had left in life that were a part of him; and I'd gotten into the habit of watching him when he turned in. He'd lie there for a couple of minutes, facing the boys at the poker table, then roll over to go to sleep, but not before his watery old eyes flicked up just once to the two ancient .44-40's.

It was my turn to get up and build the fires in both bunk room and kitchen the next morning, and after awhile I began to bellow and gibe at him about serving hot coffee to the others in bed. But old Harley didn't respond. There was no more turning over, wiping a hand across his grey mustache, yawning and grumbling about a bunch of cow wrasslers starving to death if it wasn't for the cook. So I went over to touch him on the shoulder.

I didn't touch him. He looked too natural, except that his mustache wasn't moving as it did faintly when he slept. Harley had gone out as he lay sleeping, slipping away to a place where men didn't get tired evenings or grow old, moving out into nowhere beyond and leaving us behind; us and the old guns upon the wall.

I felt rather than heard Quong behind me. He stood looking down at the old man of whom he had become so fond. "He knew, Jim," came in a murmur meant for my ears only. "He knew."

After breakfast Dad sent Wes, Slim, Quong and myself up on the ridge west of the house to build up a big fire and thaw out the ground before beginning work on the grave. Artie hooked up a team and went in after Andy Calders while the other two men took care of the feeding. Dad hunted up some boards in the barn and fashioned a rude coffin. Lenore came up after a time with a half gallon pot of hot coffee. Her eyes were a little red. She'd been pretty fond of old Harley too.

We had the grave down about four feet when Andy came back. Ed Brady, the sheriff from over at Hoogan, was with them. He had been over, making the rounds and checking up with Andy. They helped Dad get Harley into the coffin, wrapped in his blankets, then loaded him in the wagon and came on up through the deep snow.

"Well, dog-gone!" Wes ejaculated at sight of the sheriff. "If here ain't old pot belly himself. It's a good six months before summer election and darned if the old fox ain't already bustling around through the snow to show the folks what a get-up-and-go-get-'em officer he

is."

Brady got down out of the wagon, complacently puffing at his pipe; a barrel bellied, mustached man of nearly sixty. He used a mittened hand to remove the pipe from his mouth and then spat.

"I just came over to see if you were behaving yourself, you young squirt," he said. "Thought maybe you mighta got full of red-eye and got in another fight like you did last spring over at Hoogan. If it wasn't for cubs like you I wouldn't have to work so hard."

"Work!" scoffed Wes, haw-hawing derisively. "That's a good one, all right. You heard what he said, boys? Well, I got four-bits to say he can't work and won't prove it by gettin' down there in that hole and *digging*."

WE ALL began to grin expectantly but Ed Brady was game. He stripped off his big machinaw coat, grunted himself down into the grave, and got busy. Five minutes later he came out, puffing but triumphant. Wes solemnly paid over the fifty cents and we all had a laugh. Conversation dropped into passing of the news. Luke Osborn and Joe Docker had invested their poker winnings in a domino parlor next to the coal and wood business of John Barker, who was also our local minister. They were doing pretty good with soft drinks, a lot of checker boards and dominoes, but the main attraction was the poker table back in the rear, by the stove.

I remembered Luke's crooked dealings and how he had taken the boys. The "pickings" probably would indeed be good.

"How's Hal making out the last few days?" Dad asked Andy.

Hal Rogers was our liveryman in town and had been a pretty sick man for some time. He'd gotten so bad that his wife Mildred and daughter Ruth were looking after the business.

Andy shook his head. "I'm afraid Hal ain't going to be with us too much longer. I went over to see him last night. He was settin' up by the fire but Mildred said as how he's been spittin' blood the past week. That's bad."

"I'm afraid so," Ed Brady nodded. "But he might come out of it. Some of these old timers are pretty rugged customers."

We got the grave down deeper and when it reached head level Dad said it was enough. We lowered the coffin down with ropes and then Andy looked at Dad. "You reckon as how I ought to say a few words?"

"I sure do," Dad replied.

Andy reached into his coat pocket and brought out a small Bible he'd thought he ought to have, and we all uncovered our heads. He read a short piece and then lowered the Book in his hand, looking at us all.

"I ain't going to say much," the bartender-constable said. "I don't think old Harley would want it that way. Just a few things that maybe might fall in line with this Book here. It says a man should live a certain way to get a certain reward after he takes the trip Harley Role has just took. So maybe Harley didn't live just that way. But I can't believe that a man who spent his life being honest and square with every other man, who never lied or cheated, who devoted and risked his life protecting the innocent and the weak from the guilty and the criminally strong—I just don't believe that when he goes up for the final tally they're going to turn him out of the Big Corral. I just don't see it that way and I'm sure none of you boys do either. I reckon that's all."

"Amen," murmured Ed Baker, and

we put on our caps.

We fixed up the grave, went back to the ranch down below and had coffee and some cuts out of a big cake Lenore had baked for Dad, and again life began flowing along as usual.

Slim Holcomb picked up quite a little extra money at local rodeos during summers in the bronk riding contests and by giving rope spinning exhibitions and had taught me a lot. So it was kind of natural that one day Quong came back from Montrose with a lot of white cotton rope and looked to me for tutoring. I showed him how to make his loops and in no time at all he could handle one in each hand. The first time he tried one in each hand and *another* at the back of his belt, twisting his behind to keep the third one going, Slim and me went into convulsions.

I sold him a forty foot lariat and told him to start practicing on Susie.

SHE had continued to grow. The knock knees had disappeared and she was as fat as a killing hog. We let her out with the grown stuff now, because when they went after her with bared teeth a pair of lashing hind feet served notice that Susie now was big enough to take care of herself. She had been more favored of her long legged mother rather than the jack who had sired her. Except for the big mule ears, she looked much like a blue filly. Dad hadn't paid much attention to her those first months, but he was beginning to come home from Montrose now and then pretty drunk, and a couple of times I saw him watching as she fed with the horses on hay strewn over the snow down below the corrals. And I didn't like what I saw. He apparently had given up his original idea of a mule team, for the other mare had thrown a dead colt. That meant he most likely would want to sell off Susie one of these days. And that meant a clash between him and me, too, because she followed Quong at every opportunity. Certainly Dad would have torn up the place had he known she was eating pilfered strips of bacon from the breakfast frying pans.

Luke Osborn and Joe were doing pretty good in town when it came to trimming the boys at poker. Wes and the others went in and played occasionally and once I walked by to see Dad sitting in. He seemed to be losing interest in the ranch more all the time; so more and more I took over the running of it, finding enough work for all the hands.

We'd hook up a team to the front running gear of one of the hay ricks: just the tongue, the standards, and the sled runners. We'd pull up through the deep snow into the timber where pine and fir were plentiful and it was out of the wind. The ideal rail was twenty feet in length and about four inches through the thickest part of the hole. Quong got pretty good with an ax after I showed him how to fall a tree just where he wanted it by making a cut on one side close down against the snow and then, on the opposite side, cutting in a little above it. We lashed the bole ends of the rails between the running gear standards with chains and went down the hillside, the long ends dragging deep in the snow and serving as a brake to prevent the load running down on top of the team. The poles we hauled and strung out on the south range to extend the four rail fence Dad wanted built across a bad stretch of country. The rest of the fencing would be done with regular barb wire, during summer when the ground wasn't frozen for post hole digging.

The severeness of the winter had caused quite a lot of weak stock among some of the ranchers and the coyotes

got pretty bad. We didn't want any weak spring calves pulled down, so in February I bought five crippled up, broken down ponies for three dollars apiece and shot them down a mile apart all around the basin. Quong and I waited three days until the coyotes started feeding and then put out a hundred or more lard pills whose interiors were mostly strychnine. We scattered the deadly objects in a twenty foot area around each carcass, where the younger whelps and the old ones, whipped off by the bigger feeding males, would be nosing around for titbits until the big fellows finished. The next morning we loaded twenty-eight yellow carcasses on a sled runner hay rick and dumped them in a ravine three miles south of the ranch. We waited until a snow storm lulled the suspicions of the remainder, put out more pills, and got eighteen more.

In another month, when the first spring calves started dropping, we wouldn't have too many worries about hungry coyotes pulling them down.

By now Quong was riding quite a lot, using a saddle I'd outgrown until he could have one hand made; and in no time at all he knew the difference between a rim fire and center fire rig, the advantages and disadvantages of a narrow fork and swell fork, why a rope was dallied instead of *tied* around a horn, and the reason riders often wore heavy underwear during hot summer weather—to prevent saddle chafe. I answered a thousand questions about fence building, roping, marking or "gotching" ears, doctoring fence cuts to prevent blow fly worms, how to make a rope hackamore, road branding for long drives, and heaven knows what else. He was so good with a lariat now that even Wes was getting a little envious.

Wes, though, was having his own troubles. He was madly in love with Lenore and insanely jealous of everybody, even his best friend Slim Holcomb.

CHAPTER VII

I'D OFTEN wondered about Slim, as far as Lenore was concerned. He was six feet one in height and real handsome. His hair was a reddish brown though his eyes were blue. But it was his fastidious way of dressing and his gentle politeness that made the girls really go after him at the dances. I knew that Ruth Rogers liked him plenty. She was only fifteen, but you didn't think much of a girl who wasn't married by the time she was eighteen. One older than that was considered to be practically an old maid.

I knew that Lenore liked him a lot; I'd have bet she was just a little piqued because Slim Holcomb didn't respond to the bait she threw out at him. She could get any man around Montrose by the crook of a little finger and he'd come running in a hurry: all except Slim. Slim knew that Wes was crazy about her . . . and Wes was his best friend. They borrowed money off each other, rode together, drank, and Wes was always borrowing one of Slim's expensive shirts when he wanted to put on the dog at a dance.

But when it came to Lenore, Slim remained aloof. He might have thought, innerly, that he could get her any time he wished—and I think he could have—but Wes was his friend and that was the end, as far as Lenore was concerned.

She and Wes Allen were out in the open now, Dad spending a lot of his time in the saloons in town and in Luke's domino parlor. She fought with Wes one minute and let him smother her with kisses the next; taunting him,

teasing him, rousing him to helpless fury and passion. In a fit of rage one day he tore her blouse to shreds. I had gone up to the house to get a cleaning rod for my old Spencer carbine and went in to see what all the ruckus was about.

They were in the south wing and she stood with the big round reading table between them; panting, laughing, her green eyes alight with the excitement of a game she loved so well. One white breast was bared and she wasn't caring. On the other hand, she left it in full view, knowing what the sight of it was doing to him.

"I'll kill you, damn you!" he panted savagely. "I'll twist that hell cat head of yours right off."

"Oh, oh! Will you now? Hoity-toity, cowboy!"

"Why don't you two knotheads get married and get it over with?" I demanded from the doorway.

Lenore turned, covering her breast, her eyes mocking. "Marry *him?* Marry such a spoiled little boy as *that?* Why . . . I'd rather marry Quong any day than Wes. Quong is a *gentleman.*"

Wes went out of the house at a run, toward the corral. He saddled up and went loping across the frozen whiteness, straight for Montrose. And I didn't have to be told where he was going.

He got back about an hour before sundown, two thirds drunk. His lip was swollen and split. Blood was encrusted around his nose. He'd just about killed that horse getting back to the ranch. The brute was, despite the cold, drenched in sweat and lather.

Wes came in and went straight to his warbag.

"What's eating you?" I asked.

HE STRAIGHTENED with his six shooter in hand, laying it on the bunk and fumbling in the bag for a box of cartridges, which he brought out. His lips were a thin, hard line in spite of the swelling. They compressed so hard that the blood started trickling again.

"I'm going to kill Joe Docker. Caught the sonuvabitch cheating at cards and called his hand. I knew all along there was something funny about him and Luke out here last fall. Now it's finally soaked through. I'm heading right back to town—"

"You're not heading back to town on any horse from this ranch," I said, getting pretty sore about the whole business. Wes was spending entirely too much of his time around the ranch house when Dad was gone. "I don't want to have to tell the old man about you hanging around the kitchen with Lenore when you're supposed to be working up in the timber, but the boys are getting just a little fed up having to do your share of the work, Wes. Even Slim spoke about it, and he's your friend. Put away the gun, Wes, and forget it."

He stared at me coldly and then, without a word, began packing his warbag. He jerked savagely at the strings and then grunted, "I'll send back for the saddle, Jim. I'm walking in."

I blocked his way to the door. He wouldn't swing on me but all of a sudden we were down on the floor in a tangled up mess of arms and legs with me yelling for Quong, in the kitchen getting supper for the new cook, who had gone to town.

"Quong!" I yelled again. "Gimme a hand. Wes has gone loco!"

We finally got him down, with Wes yelling and cursing and calling Quong every dirty name he could lay tongue to. In the melee I grabbed the six shooter and tossed it through the door-

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SOUL OF

His eyes roved slowly from the canteen to the menacing bore of the rifle

By Chester S. Geier

THEY reached the crest of the sand ridge. Hager stopped a moment, peering with squinted eyes toward the foothills in the north. Baines took a fresh grip on the lead rope of Wanderlust, the pack burro, and followed the direction of Hager's gaze. He chuckled slightly, a dry thin sound.

"Ain't so far now. Three, four days more, an' we'll be back in Taylorville."

Hager nodded, but said nothing in return. The overhang of a long gray mustache hid his faint grin of mocking contempt. Hank Baines, Hager thought in dark humor, would have been very much surprised to learn that he was never going to reach Taylorville. Hager had other plans for Baines.

Baines chuckled again. "Folks back in Taylorville are goin' to be mighty surprised when they hear about the silver strike we made, eh, Silas?"

"Sure will," Hager grunted. His derisive grin broadening, he reached into a pocket of his threadbare, wrinkled vest, produced a sack of tobacco and papers, and began to roll a cigarette. He was a tall, gaunt oldster, with a long, bony face that had a look of sly hunger.

The look in Hager's face became

THE VULTURE

Hank Baines looked at Hager with eyes that saw more than the physical form there in the desert—and found a vulture

hungrier, more sly, as he thought of the silver vein that he and Baines had discovered several days before. It was the sort of strike that happens once—if at all—in a prospector's lifetime. The vein was rich enough to set up Hager and Baines in comfort for the rest of their lives. But mere comfort wasn't enough for Hager. He had bigger dreams, bigger hopes, than that. What he wanted was to return East, have a big house, fine clothes, and rich friends. And even more than that, he wanted to show certain persons how wrong they were when they had called him shiftless, a man who would never amount to anything.

Baines was the obstacle who stood in the way of these ambitions, for Hager would have to split the profits of the silver lode with him. Hager felt that his day of glory required every bit of wealth he could lay hands on. He had long since decided that Baines must go. Murder was easy enough to commit, but what had held off Hager this long was the problem of doing it in a way that would put him safely beyond suspicion from the law.

Hager knew folks back in Taylorville would think it mighty strange that Baines should die just as he and Hager made a rich silver strike. Sheriff Melquist, in particular, was a shrewd cuss. There was a strong possibility that he would investigate. Thus if Hager were simply to shoot Baines, the bullet holes would be damning evidence against him in the event that Melquist dug Baines up.

HAGER exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke and scowled anxiously. Somehow he had to find a way of killing Baines that would leave no external marks. And he had to do it soon—before he and Baines reached Taylorville. Once they hit town Hager's chance would forever be gone.

Baines said suddenly, "'Smatter, Silas? You been mighty thoughtful lately."

"Uh—just been thinking about my share of the silver lode," Hager lied. "Don't know what I'm going to do with all the money."

Baines released one of his dry chuckles. "Well, I know what I'm goin' to do with mine. Buy me a business, that's what. Maybe a store, or a small hotel, even. No more traipsin' over the desert for me. An' there's little Billy Dolan. Somethin' wrong with him, inside. Doc Werner says only a specialist back East can fix him up. Billy's folks ain't got the money—but the boy'll go East, now. An' to college later on."

Hager threw away his cigarette with a sharp gesture that was mostly an outlet for a sudden surge of irritation. He muttered, "We better start moving again. Have to find a place to pitch camp before it gets dark."

They went down the ridge slope and across the sand flat beyond, moving once more toward the foothills in the north. Shadows sprawled across the rugged desert terrain, stretching longer and darker as the sun dropped toward the sawtooth outline of mountains in the west, wrapping itself in a glorious blanket of rose and gold cloud. A faint breeze that was a herald of the night touched the faces of the two men, made the drooping ears of Wanderlust, the pack burro, twitch in dull eagerness.

As he usually did, Hager strode aggressively in the fore of the tiny procession. He had long ago assumed a leadership which mild-natured, easy-going Hank Baines had never chosen to contest. Hager was considerably younger than Baines, considerably more spry, and perhaps the truth is that

Baines was content to follow along at a pace more suited to his older muscles.

Hager was straining once more at his problem of finding a safe method to dispose of Baines, when a sudden flicker of motion from above caught his eye. He glanced up, and in the next instant smothered a curse.

A vulture flapped in lazy circles high over the two men.

Baines' seamed, leathery features widened in a grin. "Ol' Lucifer again," he announced. "Smart critter, eh Silas? Lucifer knows it's gettin' along toward supper time."

"That's about the only time the thing shows up," Hager growled in thinly veiled annoyance.

"Shucks, ol' Lucifer's f r i e n d l y enough," Baines defended. "Ain't like other vultures. He's got a soul, that's what."

Hager snorted. "Soul!"

"'Course, Silas, or ol' Lucifer wouldn't have took to humans in the first place. Other vultures ain't got souls, which is why they're scared of humans. 'Fraid of their souls, that's what. An' that's why they eat dead meat—no soul left in it."

HAGER tightened his lips and said nothing more. He was only too familiar with the ideas Baines had concerning Lucifer, the vulture—ideas that Hager considered addle-brained, childish, and several other things even less complimentary. And Hager was experienced enough by now with Baines' line of argument to know that it led only in circles.

Hager maintained his silence while Lucifer continued to soar overhead, following their progress over the sand. Hager threw occasional black glances at the bird. He'd have shot it down long ago if he hadn't known it would cause a lot of bad feeling against him. The vulture was well-known to the people of the region, and a surprising number of them even considered it as a pet. These latter—which included Baines—made a regular habit of feeding Lucifer with scraps of food. Lucifer's own kind constantly drove it away from anything edible. The vulture, in fact, was shunned by its fellows—even attacked with deadly intent at times. Something about Lucifer, perhaps its friendship for Man, or something deeper, marked it as different—a pariah.

Baines often seized upon this fact as added proof that Lucifer had a soul. Hager, while refusing to regard the idea seriously, had to admit there was a quality about Lucifer that set it apart. It was a quality not entirely due to Lucifer's having been raised as a pet by a near-crazy old hermit, who had caught the bird when it was still quite young. For long after the hermit had died, Lucifer's attachment to Man had kept it from reverting to complete wildness. Lucifer remained tame enough in a distant, wary sort of way.

Hager's and Baines' journey led them over the lip of a gulley, and to avoid a stretch of rough, rock-strewn ground beyond, they followed the gulley some distance. Its floor sloped gradually downward, and as they approached its far end, Hager, who was in the lead as usual, made a discovery. In a depression of the sloping floor was a pool of water about five feet across.

Hager turned as Baines reached his side. "Didn't know there was water around here. We might as well fill the empty canteens. We only got one filled canteen apiece now."

Baines shook his unkept white hair emphatically, watery blue eyes grim. "I been this way before. This here's poisoned water, that's what. Drink it, an' you die like that." Baines snapped his bony fingers.

Hager stared at the pool with abrupt eagerness. In his mind the pieces of a hitherto baffling puzzle clicked into place.

He was going to murder Baines—and get away with it.

Dimly, through his new-found triumph, he heard the other talking. "Was a warning posted over the water the last time I been this way. The sheriff ought to see about settin' up another one, or it's goin' to be too bad for folks who don't know about the water being poisoned."

Hager nodded, concealing his excitement, and glanced at the sky. "It'll be dark soon. We'd better find a place to pitch camp around here." He led the way out of the gulley, climbing the rubble along the slope of the wall. Baines and Wanderlust followed.

Hager didn't go very far. He called a halt at a group of sun-bleached boulders, which would offer protection from the cold night winds. Hager could barely keep the gloating from showing on his face. The spot was perfect for his plans—just near enough to the poisoned water pool.

While Hager seated himself on a rock and began loosening his boots, Baines set about making camp. The very first thing he did was to hobble Wanderlust. The little burro's name was an apt one in that it seldom failed to seize the opportunity to wander off. Baines, long accustomed to the burro's peculiarity, performed the hobbling unconsciously, through force of long habit.

REMOVING Wanderlust's pack load, Baines gathered an armful of brushwood and built a fire. He began cooking a supper of beans, bacon, biscuits, and coffee. Hager watched, a faint sneer of contempt visible under his drooping gray mustache. He made no move to help Baines, and for that matter he never did. Baines did all chores gladly and uncomplainingly, and Hager had long since taken advantage of the other's easy-going nature.

There was a flutter of wings, and Lucifer settled down on a large rock some distance away. The vulture shifted impatiently on its perch, moving its wings like a tiny old woman fumbling nervously with her shawl. The beady black eyes, glittering on either side of the strong hooked beak, watched Baines eagerly.

Baines chuckled and began speaking to the bird in a soft voice of reassurance. "Hungry, eh? Ain't you had nothin' to eat? Or is it that you're always hankerin' for a taste of men's grub? Well, just you be patient like, an' there'll be somethin' to nibble on."

Hager's sneer grew more pronounced. As though to relieve his disgust, he produced the tobacco sack and papers, and began to roll a cigarette.

In another several minutes supper was ready. Baines set out the tin plates and cups, and then he and Hager settled down to eat. Hager devoted himself with scowling concentration to his food, paying no attention as Baines frequently tossed the vulture bits of biscuit or bacon.

When the meal was over, Baines immediately began the task of cleaning up. The sun was almost gone behind the mountains, taking its gloriously hued blanket with it down the sky. Apparently certain that no more tidbits were forthcoming, Lucifer spread its wings and flapped away into the gathering darkness.

Hager, back propped against a boulder, began rolling a cigarette. He noticed that his fingers shook a little. Thoughts of the poisoned water pool and of night were sharp in his mind.

It was going to be easy. He'd just wait until Baines was asleep. Then,

stealthily, he'd take Baines' canteen, empty it, and fill it with poisoned water from the pool. In the morning Baines would drink—and die. It was quite common knowledge in Taylorville that Baines had a weak heart. Doc Werner had even given Baines a little tube of white pills, which Baines was supposed to take whenever his heart started acting up. Hager thus could claim that Baines had died from a heart attack brought on by the excitement of the silver strike. And if Sheriff Melquist snooped around, there would be no marks on Baines to show otherwise.

HAGER would be completely in the clear. He'd file a claim to the silver lode, then sign a contract with one of the big mine operators in Taylorville, and finally head East. Impatience rose within him as he thought of the new life of luxury and ease that awaited him once Baines were dead.

Night closed in around the tiny camp fire. Baines yawned deeply and stretched. At last, removing his boots, he lay down on the side of the fire opposite Hager and covered himself with his blanket.

"Night, Silas."

"Night," Hager responded. His lips thinned in a hard smile as he removed his own boots and settled under his blanket in a pretense of going to sleep. He lay quietly, waiting.

There was a deep silence, broken only by the crackling and rustling of the camp fire as it burned down to a few dull-red embers. The silver saucer of the moon climbed a sky the color of polished gun-metal, strewn with hard bright stars that were like countless, staring eyes.

Hager was watching Baines across the fast fading glow of the fire. The other's shadowy form was very still. His breathing was deep and regular. At last, certain that his victim was safely asleep, Hager rose stealthily and crossed in his stockinged feet to the pile of equipment nearby, where Baines had left his water canteen. With the container in his possession, Hager stalked toward the poisoned water pool, the moon lighting his way.

As he had planned, he didn't have far to go. The pool gleamed in the moon's radiance, making it easy to locate in the dusk. Hager descended toward it along the rubble-strewn slope of the gulley wall, careful to make no noise.

First he emptied Baines' canteen. Then he began to fill it with poisoned water from the pool, using the brim of his hat as a scoop, so that the canvas cover of the canteen wouldn't be wetted and thus betray the fact that it had been tampered with. The felt material of the hat shed most of the water, and what little remained would dry quickly enough not to be noticed.

Finally, his grim task completed, Hager corked the canteen and began to climb out of the gulley. Half-way up the slope, he stopped as suddenly as though he'd run into a wall.

Baines stood on the ground above the gulley, vague but recognizable even in the gloom. Moonlight glittered wickedly on the pointed six-gun in his hand. His voice sounded in a tone sharp and hard with accusation.

"I followed you out of camp, Silas. I seen what you was doin'. Tryin' to poison me, that's what!"

Still stupified with shock, Hager gasped, "But . . . but you were asleep!"

Baines' shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I wake easy, Silas. Was up soon as you started movin' around. I been keepin' my eye on you, that's what. You been actin' mighty strange since we made the silver strike, an' I tol'

myself I better be careful. Way things turned out, I was right. You was plannin' to get me out of the way with that poisoned water, there, so's you'd have the silver lode all to yourself!"

Hager felt sick with despair. His hopes and dreams were crashing in ruins around him.

THEN he grew coldly calm. Realization came that he still had a chance if he played his cards right. He became filled with cunning purpose. He grinned abruptly at Baines, and shook his head.

"Why, hell, Hank, you're all wrong! I just happened to be thinking about a lot of things—couldn't sleep, see? Then I remembered hearing somewhere that if you boil poisoned water it becomes just like regular water. So I thought I'd play safe and fill a canteen in case our water gave out. That's all, Hank. Nothing to get riled about, is there?"

"Maybe not," Baines said. "But if you wanted to play safe like you said, why'd you take my canteen?"

Hager looked greatly astonished. "Your canteen, Hank? Hell, I thought it was one of the empty ones! Guess I was half sleeping and got mixed up in the dark!"

"Then why didn't you wait until mornin'?" Baines demanded. "Looks mighty strange, you sneakin' off into the dark like that."

"I just couldn't wait, Hank. I always did have a habit of jumping the gun when I got an idea."

Baines snorted. "I know what you was up to Silas, and lyin' ain't goin' to help you any." He gestured impatiently with the six-gun. "All right, come on up out of there, now!"

Hager hesitated in sudden apprehension. "What . . . what are you going to do?"

"Take you back to camp an' tie you up, that's what. I don't aim to take any more chances with you, Silas." Baines gestured again. "Come on!"

Hager slowly started the rest of the way up the slope. As his head drew level with Baines' waist, he ducked abruptly beneath the pointed gun and hurled himself at Baines' legs. With a yelp of surprise, Baines went down, his weapon spitting harmlessly into the darkness.

The ensuing struggle was a short one. Hager was younger and faster than Baines. Before the older man could recover from the shock of the attack, Hager lunged forward, pinning down the hand with the gun. Then he swung a fist—once . . . twice. Baines went limp.

Hager finally rose, breathing hard. He looked down at Baines a moment, lips twisting in a grin of triumph. Then he stooped to pick up his hat and the canteen. Baines' gun, which he already had, he stuffed into his belt. Slinging the strap of the canteen over one shoulder, he grasped Baines under the shoulders and dragged the unconscious man back to camp.

With a coil of rope, Hager securely bound Baines' arms and legs. There was a rifle among the equipment, belonging to Hager. Mainly to have all the weapons in his possession, he obtained this and settled himself on guard.

Thinking the situation over, Hager began to frown. Baines now knew the canteen held poisoned water. He would refuse to drink. And Hager couldn't shoot Baines or in any other way mark him up.

In another moment Hager had the solution. He'd march Baines over the desert, give him nothing at all to drink. With the exertion of walking and the hot desert sun sucking the moisture out of him, Baines would soon be dying for

water. And out of his head with thirst, he would jump at anything offered him.

Hager smiled bleakly. He could even trick Baines—pretend to give him the good water, but substitute the poisoned water instead. Once far gone with thirst, Baines would be willing to risk anything for a drink.

SATISFIED with his plans, Hager fell asleep. He woke with the light of the morning sun in his eyes. Baines was already awake. The sand around him was scuffed up, showing that he had tried futilely to escape from his bonds.

Baines glared at Hager a moment, then demanded, "What you aimin' to do with me, Silas?"

"Nothing at all, Hank. But since you're so set against me, there's nothing I can do but keep you tied up."

"That's a lie!" Baines snapped. "You're plannin' to kill me so's to have the silver lode all for yourself!"

"I'd be a fool to shoot you," Hager pointed out. "Bullet holes would be evidence against me in case the sheriff dug you up."

"What about the poisoned water?"

"I told you why I wanted it, Hank. Besides, I couldn't make you drink poisoned water, if you didn't want to."

Baines fell silent. After a while Hager said:

"If you promise not to start anything, Hank, I'll untie you so you can make breakfast."

"You can go chase yourself to hell!" Baines growled.

Hager shrugged. "All right, I'll make breakfast—but you don't eat."

Baines looked thoughtful. "I'll make breakfast," he said.

Holding a six-gun in one hand, and working with the other, Hager cautiously freed Baines' wrists, then stood by on guard while Baines loosened the ropes around his legs. He kept close watch as Baines gathered brushwood, built a fire, and began cooking breakfast. At one point Baines asked:

"What about some water for coffee?"

"We'll do without coffee," Hager answered. "Have to save water."

Baines looked thoughtful again. He said nothing further.

Punctual as usual, Lucifer appeared and settled down on a rock a few yards away. Baines was about to toss the vulture a piece of flapjack, but a sharp command from Hager stopped him.

"No more of that, Hank! I'm sick and tired of having that thing hang around. Stop feeding it, and it'll go away."

"But Lucifer ain't doin' no harm," Baines protested. "Fact he hangs around shows he's got a soul, that's what."

"I'm sick and tired of hearing about its soul, too," Hager grunted. "So shut up and leave the damned thing alone."

THEY ate in strained silence. The meal over, Hager produced his canteen and took a long drink. He was corking the canteen, when Baines said abruptly:

"Say, ain't . . . ain't you goin' to give me a drink, Silas?"

"On one condition," Hager said.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll be frank with you, Hank. I want the silver lode for myself. If you sign a paper turning it over to me. I'll let you have all the water you want."

Baines gasped in rage and started to his feet. Hager whipped up the rifle, pointing it warningly.

"Calm down, Hank!"

Baines sat down again, and Hager said, "Well, what about the offer I made?"

"To the devil with your offer!" Baines choked out.

Hager shrugged and stood up. "Think it over, Hank. Right now we better start moving. You get busy packing things up."

Baines hesitated a moment, eyes defiant. Then he climbed slowly to his feet and began breaking camp. A short time later they were on their way over the desert. Lucifer followed for a while, puzzled and indignant at having been ignored. Presently the vulture ceased its slow circling and flapped out of sight toward the east.

The sun climbed a stairway in the sky, growing increasingly warm from the effort. The desert rolled away and away under the trudging feet of the two men, a desolate, parched expanse of sand, cactus growths, and sun-baked rock. Slowly the hours passed. Hager drank occasionally from his canteen. Each time he glanced craftily at Baines. The older man pretended not to notice. He looked away stonily, lips pressed into a thin stubborn line.

The sun reached zenith, blazing down remorselessly. Heat rose from the sand in shimmering waves. They moved through it with growing difficulty, as though they waded through a sea of solid, resisting water. Baines began to stagger a little. A glaze seemed to cover his faded blue eyes, and his lips were beginning to crack.

Lucifer appeared and began circling above them. Hager was aware of the vulture only dimly. He was exhausted, but he forced himself on, bleakly determined to keep Baines moving until he broke.

Baines, however, possessed an astonishing amount of endurance. Though his staggering grew worse, he kept going. Hager was forced at last to call a halt.

Baines lowered himself wearily to the sand and sat without moving, head resting against his bony knees. Hager settled down a safe distance away, maintaining his vigil with the rifle. Lucifer continued to circle a while longer, then came down to perch on a distant rock.

Hager began to feel better. Thought of food crossed his mind. He glanced around for Wanderlust, suddenly remembering both the burro's annoying habit and the fact that it carried the food. Wanderlust, true to its name, had wandered off. Fortunately, however, it hadn't had time to go very far. With a muttered curse, Hager prodded Baines to his feet and went after the burro.

With Wanderlust caught and hobbled, Hager ordered Baines to begin cooking the afternoon meal. Baines starting in without protest. His manner clearly indicated that he was doing it more for himself than for Hager.

THE meal of flapjacks and bacon made Baines even thirstier if possible than before. He was no longer able to ignore Hager when the latter finished eating and drank from the canteen. For the first time, Baines broke down and begged for water.

"Ready to sign the silver lode over to me?" Hager inquired slyly.

Baines' bewhiskered features hardened. "No—damn you!"

Hager shrugged. "No water for you, then."

A short time later they were plodding once more over the desert. Food and rest had strengthened Baines, and for a while he was able to keep up a steady pace. But he was an old man, and his enforced water fast, together with the constant, grueling march and the moisture-sapping, furnace-like heat of the sun, began quickly to drain away his last reserves of endurance. By evening he was barely able to drag his feet through the sand. When Hager

finally stopped to pitch camp for the night, Baines dropped weakly to the sand and lay in an exhausted stupor.

Hager was hungry. He slapped Baines roughly several times in the effort to rouse the other sufficiently to cook supper. But Baines was too far gone. Swearing under his breath, Hager gave up. After taking the precaution of tying Baines, Hager turned to make camp and cook supper himself. The fact that Wanderlust had started to drift away during the interim didn't help Hager's feelings any.

Baines was somewhat better by morning, but it was plain as soon as the journey was resumed that he wouldn't be able to last very long. His thirst by now was intense, and in addition he'd had neither supper nor breakfast. Hager, in retaliation for having had to do the cooking, had chosen to ignore him.

Baines stumbled and fell several times during the march, but sensing victory close at hand, Hager forced him to continue on. In the afternoon they reached a ravine. Baines fell once more, but Hager let him lay. Hager was certain that the time had come.

He made his preparations quickly. Obtaining the canteen of poisoned water, he slung it over his shoulder in place of his own, which he placed out of sight behind a rock. Baines, face buried in the crook of one arm, half unconscious, didn't notice what was going on.

Finally Hager seated himself on a rock at the side of the ravine opposite Baines. Placing the rifle across his knees, he rolled a cigarette. He smoked leisurely, waiting.

Lucifer put in an appearance, settling down to perch on a mesquite shrub at the mouth of the ravine. The vulture watched the two men intently, as though bewildered by what was taking place.

The minutes dragged away. And then Baines stirred. He raised his head from the pillow of his arm and looked pleadingly at Hager. A desperation close to madness glittered in his eyes. His dry, cracked lips opened, but it was some seconds before he could speak.

"Water!" Baines whispered. "Got . . . to have . . . water."

Hager pretended to think it over. "What about the silver lode? Are you willing to sign it over to me?"

Baines nodded. "Anything! I'll do . . . anything!"

"All right, then." Hager slipped the strap of the canteen from his shoulder and tossed the container onto the sand near Baines. He watched, the rifle pointed alertly, as Baines crawled weakly toward the canteen.

REACHING the container, Baines fumbled at it in frantic haste. His hands trembled uncontrollably as he raised it to his lips. He drank with pathetic eagerness, water trickling down his chin and throat. Finally he sat up, breathing heavily.

In another moment Baines began to look puzzled. He ran his tongue over his mouth, features twisted wryly.

Mocking laughter burst from Hager. "You poor fool! That was poisoned water you drank! Getting you to sign the silver lode over to me was just a trick. Think I'd take the chance that you'd give me away when we reached town? Now the silver lode is mine—and I don't have to worry about you making any trouble."

A look of unutterable horror appeared on Baines' face. His shaking hands went slowly to his throat. He stared at Hager for a long moment. Then, suddenly, his lips writhed back from his teeth in pain. His fingers tightened on his throat. His eyes closed.

In another few seconds his tense form relaxed, all the stiffness abruptly going out of it. He slumped sideways on the sand and lay very still.

It was over. Hager released his breath and stood up. Purpose flowed into him. There was no time to waste. He'd bury Baines and continue the rest of the way toward town. The sooner he was on his way East, the better he would like it.

Hager looked around for Wanderlust. He needed a shovel to bury Baines, and the implement was fastened to the burro's pack load. But Wanderlust was nowhere in sight. Hager cursed himself for having forgotten to hobble the animal.

Lucifer took to the air in sudden fright as Hager ran to the mouth of the ravine to peer over the unobstructed expanse of the desert beyond. Hager glimpsed the burro in the distance. Muttering furious obscenities, he set out after it.

With Hager's going, a strange thing happened back in the ravine. Baines' apparently d e a d form moved. He raised his head cautiously and glanced around him. A thin chuckle came from his lips.

"A fool, eh? You're the fool, Silas, for not knowin' that poisoned water don't work as fast as I made like it did!"

The circling of Lucifer overhead shortly drew Baines' attention. He watched the vulture for several seconds, and then he smiled grimly. He rose, moving with the deliberation of one who who has a plan. The water—even though poisoned and acting on him now —s e e m e d to have refreshed and strengthened him sufficiently for what he intended to do.

From the rummage shop assortment of objects which he habitually carried in his pockets, Baines produced a roll of strong twine. He made a noose of this and arranged it carefully on the mesquite bush. He payed out the remaining length of twine, moving away from the bush, until several yards separated him from it. Then he sat down and searched quickly through his pockets for the rest of the things he would need.

Within the next few seconds he brought out a vial of pills Doc Werner had prescribed for his heart, a scrap of paper, the stub of a pencil, and a length of wire that he removed from a leather pouch in which he carried ore samples. He worked busily over these articles, glancing from time to time at Lucifer, who was beginning to descend once more toward the mesquite bush. He chuckled again.

"We'll fix him, we will. You an' me, Lucifer. And all 'cause you have a soul, that's what."

Soon Baines had everything ready. He had only to wait until Lucifer settled down on the bush. When the vulture finally did so, he moved quickly.

BAINES was finished. And none too soon. Pain—real pain, this time—was beating at him in growing waves. He had barely stretched out in the position in which Hager had left him, when the pain reached an abrupt crescendo. He stiffened, clawed fingers digging into the sand. Then he lay very quietly—stilled in death.

A quarter of an hour had passed by the time Hager returned to the ravine with Wanderlust. Lucifer still circled in the air overhead. Hager paid the vulture no attention. Had he done so, he might have noticed that Lucifer seemed queerly agitated, as though having undergone a harrowing experience.

Hager looked at the motionless form of Baines and grinned with satisfaction. Obtaining his canteen from behind the

rock where he had placed it, he took a long drink. Then, with the shovel from Wanderlust's pack load, he began digging a grave.

Two days later Hager was in Taylorville. One of the very first things he did was to stop at Sheriff Melquist's office in the town jail and report Baines' death. His story was simple. He and Baines had made a rich silver strike and had been on their way back to town, when Baines had collapsed from a sudden heart attack. His weak heart hadn't been able to stand the excitement of the strike. Hager would have brought Baines in to Taylorville for burial, but it had been a long distance, and moreover Baines had always wanted to be buried out in the desert. Hager explained he had done just that, describing the location of Baines' grave with the exactness of one whose conscience is very clear.

Melquist nodded solemnly at intervals, but asked no questions as he certainly would have done if he suspected something wrong. He merely said he was sorry to hear about Baines' death, and he thanked Hager for having come in to report it. Hager finally left, bursting with relief and exultation.

The next thing Hager did was to file a claim to the silver lode. That done, he went to the tiny cabin at the edge of town that he had shared with Baines, where he washed, ate, and changed into other clothes. Then he went out to begin a round of calls on the more important of Taylorville's mine operators. He didn't intend to waste any time settling the details which would at last see him on his way East.

WITHIN the next few days Hager struck up an agreement with one of his prospects. The terms were even better than he had hoped for.

Walking on clouds, he went to his cabin to begin packing for his long-awaited trip East. A shock flashed through him as he opened the door.

Sheriff Melquist was seated in one of the chairs.

Hager forced a smile to cover up his momentary expression of dismay. "Why, hello, Sheriff! What brings you here?"

"A little thing called murder," Melquist said. "The murder of old Hank Baines. You're under arrest, Hager."

Hager stared in consternation. "But how . . .?" Abruptly his lips thinned. "You're crazy!" he burst out. "Hank Baines died of a heart attack. If you dug him up, you must have seen there wasn't a mark on him."

Melquist slowly shook his head, watching Hager gravely. "I didn't dig up old Hank Baines—but I know he was murdered. You see, a couple of men left town the other day to do some prospecting out in the desert. Lucifer the vulture started following them for grub as he always does, and when they stopped to eat, he came down for scraps. One of the men noticed that Lucifer had a small bottle wired to one of his legs, so he and his partner set a little trap for Lucifer and caught him. They got the bottle. There was a note in it, written by Hank Baines, explaining as how you gave him poisoned water to drink, so you'd have the silver lode all for yourself.

"I don't know how Hank Baines managed to write the note and fix it up that way without you seeing him, but it's plain he caught Lucifer just like these two men caught him. And he used Lucifer because he knew Lucifer would hang around other folks, who sooner or later would notice the bottle. It was the only way he could let folks know what you had done to him. He knew you'd have found the note and tore it up, if he left it anywhere near

him. And if he hid it, then nobody'd have found it." Melquist smiled a cold, bleak smile.

"Old Hank Baines got even with you proper, Silas Hager! And all because Lucifer is a friendly cuss for a vulture and likes to hang around folks—maybe for something to eat, maybe for something else. Hank Baines would say it's because Lucifer has a soul. And I ain't too sure that he wouldn't have been right." Melquist slowly started forward. "Now you know all you need to know, Silas Hager. Now you're coming along with me."

Almost crazy with grief from the destruction of all his hopes and dreams, Hager forgot something. He forgot Melquist's reputation for being a lightning-fast hand with a gun. As Melquist came slowly toward him, Hager grabbed abruptly for the weapon holstered at his hip.

It was the last thing he ever did.

YANKEE DAREDEVIL IN A SKIRT

THE UNWRITTEN STORY behind the scenes of the Civil War contains many startling facts about the important role that women spies played in the proceedings. Plans and maps vanished strangely, and departmental secrets were continually leaking out without the least bit of suspicion being thrown in the general direction of the gentle women sympathizers with the Confederate cause. Clever women, far from the sinister Mata-Hara type in both appearance and manner, were used to good advantage by both sides in the battle. Emma Edmonds was one of the most valuable spies the Yankee forces had in their employ.

Ten days after Lincoln's first call for troops, Emma Edmonds was ready to start for Washington and go to the front as a field nurse. Her dark eyes danced with anticipation for she was anxious to do something for her country. Originally Emma had studied to become a foreign missionary, but saw that she could be useful at home aiding the Yankee wounded. Her work at the front brought admiration and loud acclaim; and without her knowledge a chaplain recommended her to headquarters as good spy material to replace an agent executed by the enemy.

Emma Edmonds was surprised when she was summoned before a group of Intelligence officers and cross-questioned; that they were considering to use her as a spy did not even enter her mind. With a new burden of responsibility poised on her beautiful shoulders, Emma undertook to carry through her first assignment behind the enemy lines.

A disguise was prepared hurriedly. At Fortress Monroe her head was shaved, and she donned an old denim suit. With the proper wig and darkened skin she was able to slip through the lines as a runaway Negro, taking with her only a revolver and a few hard crackers. The most difficult test was yet to come. That morning she joined a party of Negroes carrying food and hot coffee out to the Confederate pickets. That same day she could be found working as a road laborer, pushing barrows of gravel with other darkies while her mind was working at top speed making mental notes of the number and type of the mounted guns she saw. Unwatched she was able to make rough sketches of their positions and quickly conceal them under the insoles of her shoes.

Five dollars placed in the palm of the waterboy, put her in his place for the following day. While the grinning "boy" ran to and fro between the men satisfying their thirst, she heard the gossip of the camp, learning how many reinforcements had arrived and where they were from. The third day the avenue for her escape was strategically opened for her. Ordered to go on duty as a temporary guard, they handed her a rifle and suggested that she use it freely in case she noticed anybody approaching from the enemy. Little did they know that they had been addressing one of their most treacherous enemies! Emma slipped quietly away into the night, and when the first light of dawn streaked over the fields, she was safely back inside the Yankee lines.

The information she was able to provide for the North from this and ten other equally hazardous trips through the lines shortened the war by many weeks. When she wasn't spying, Emma was at the side of the wounded caring for their every need with the few drugs and clumsy methods which were in use during those days. With limited resources, she did all within her power to aid them, risking her own life many times in removing wounded under heavy fire. The men were amazed at her bravery and grief-stricken when they learned that she was a victim of fever.

The illness left her permanently weakened, so much so that she had to leave the fighting zone and return to her home in New England. There she could only watch the battle from the sidelines, rest, and reminisce. Her book, "Nurse and Spy," furnished the country with a vivid description of the medical department, and the camp hospitals as they really were, their obvious inadequacies, and the possibilities for improvement. Emma Edmonds never gave up fighting on the side of Right, even when she had to confine herself to the printed word.

Robert Maxon

GATEWAY TO THE WEST

SINNERS and saints, traders and trappers, pioneers and poets, covered wagoners and Pony Express riders dashing out to the West passed through the city of St. Joseph in Missouri. Many stayed to become its permanent citizens. The town which played a great part in the building of the West was founded by the trapper and trader, Joseph Robidoux, who started a trading post there in 1803. He was one of four adventurous and hardy young brothers who trekked everywhere in the rough western lands. Thirty-nine years after opening his store, Joseph Robidoux laid out the town for the oncoming settlers and gave it the name of his patron saint. And the community of St. Joseph prospered and grew, for it became one of the busiest gathering and outfitting depots for the covered wagons.

Fame came to the town when it was chosen as the starting-off place for the Pony Express. April 3rd, 1860, was the date of that first historic gallop with the mail across the West. That day brought people from miles around to the community to witness the start in this new speeded up method of communication. A great crowd had assembled in the streets, and the excitement was running high. Flags were flying everywhere, and a brass band could be heard blaring out its rousing marches. A shortline railroad had been arranged to run an excursion as well as bring in the mail from the East.

When the train pulled into the station, men who had been assigned to the duty transferred the mail pouches to a wagon which was sent rattling down the street to the post office. A few minutes were taken to sort out the Pacific mail, and it was then made ready for the express rider. Johnny Frey was the man to first hit the trail in the name of the Pony Express. He was a wiry little fellow, scarcely twenty years old, weighing only one hundred and twenty-five pounds.

As the last buckle was adjusted, Johnny sprung into the saddle; a few of the nearest excited spectators pulled hairs from his horse's tail for souvenirs, then the throng scattered to make way for him. Down the main street of St. Joe, he went at a furious clip, with the people's shouts hurrying him on. It was a day to be remembered.

But the citizens of St. Joe, at least most of the older ones, will remember a shadier side of the history of the city. Jesse James lived there, plundered the country for miles around, caused a reign of terror on the railroads by staging many robberies on moving trains . . . and then came to a violent end in his house on the hill when he was shot in the back by one of the members of his gang.

There is none of the rush of the old days to be seen in the streets of St. Joe today. It has acquired the stability and the peace of a community in the center of a rich farming region. Gone are the cowboys, the covered wagons, and the men who piloted the boats up and down the once-busy Missouri River. A statue of the Pony Express rider in action stands as a reminder in the park before the City Hall, a reminder of the days that are now long past. *Jeffry Stevens*

THE FEARLESS DAVY

THE immortality of David Crockett, like the immortality of many socially useful men, is not beyond our understanding. Despite the hardships and disappointments that continually came his way, David Crockett achieved immortality. He possessed a character illustrious for its qualities of vitality, fearlessness, and independence which enabled him to play such a spectacular role in the building of the West.

Born in 1786 the fifth son in a poverty stricken family, he was forced to set out at the age of twelve herding cattle. From then on he remained upon his own, forging his way ahead first as pioneer and Indian fighter and second as political leader, persistent and never accepting defeat. His spirit shone through his sharp eyes, and gave zest to his quick step. Marrying an industrious and courageous woman, he attempted to settle down to farming. But with the onslaught of the war with the Creek Indians, he enthusiasticaly embarked upon another adventure. Two years after he returned home, the tragedy of his beloved wife's death overtook him. Unable to reside there in restraint any longer, he took his three children and moved west. There he re-married happily and soon afterwards entered politics, having been selected by the people as the district's first magistrate. Recognized as the leader of the community, he was nominated and elected to the Tennessee legislature. While there he carried through his tasks effectively and received high respect from his fellow citizens. But another personal misfortune came his way and forced him on to further pioneering. The mill he and his wife had put their hearts into, had gone into debt in order to construct, was destroyed by the river. As a result he gave himself over to hunting and became famous for the abundance of bear and other game with which he supplied his family and friends. But it wasn't long before the ever-increasing fire within him pushed him on to more difficult and more socially constructive endeavors. Seeing justice in the plea of the Cherokee Indians who were being pushed out of their land by the white men, he defended their cause verbally, and committed political suicide for himself. Pioneering on into Texas at the time Texas was demanding independence from Mexico, he took up arms with his brave people and died while gallantly defending the Alamo.

After David Crockett's death, his varied activities continued to increase through salty legends invented and publicized by his admirers.

Sandy Miller

A NECK FOR A NOOSE

By H. B. Hickey

RUD had just passed the jug back to his father when the door burst open and Sheriff Beal marched in.

"Rud!" he roared. "Godamm it, Rud! Where's that saddle?"

Rud's dark face moved not a line. "What saddle?" he asked evenly.

The red in Beal's neck crept up to his cheeks. "You know what saddle! Bill Talbert's!"

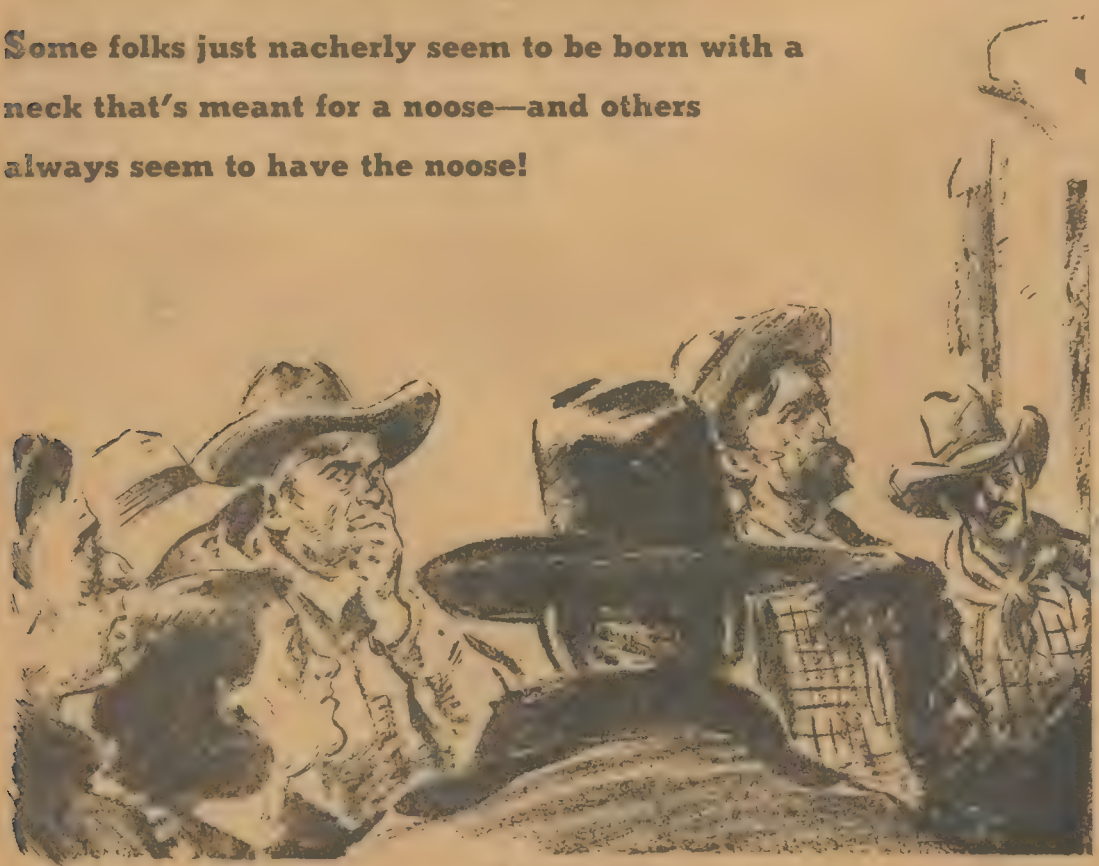
Katie Gleason came bustling in from the kitchen. "What's wrong here? Rud! Jimmy! What's wrong?"

Jimmy Gleason's look was as haughty as any look from bloodshot eyes could be. "Go back to the kitchen, Katherine. We men folks will handle this."

Rud's voice broke through. "Don't know what you're talkin' about, Sheriff."

"You know damn well what I'm talkin' about! Those hob-nail boots of yours left a trail you could see from here to Newell!"

Some folks just nacherly seem to be born with a neck that's meant for a noose—and others always seem to have the noose!



"Wait," called a voice, "we wanna see his eyes pop!"

Rud looked down at his shoes, as his father muttered at him, "Damn fool! Don'tcha know better'n to wear those boots when you're after somethin'!"

"Now, listen, Sheriff!" Jimmy swayed drunkenly to his feet, tipping the jug so the golden liquid ran down the sheriff's trousers. "My God!" he mumbled; "think this was water I was spillin' around!"

Beal's face was now a deep purple. "You drunken fool! Now you've ruined my pants!"

"Drunken fool!" mumbled Jimmy. "Get m'gun, Rud!"

He started to get it himself but tripped over his own feet and landed on the floor still mumbling. "Sooner fight than eat! Sooner fight than eat!"

Rud got him back on his feet and then steadied him into a chair. He turned to face the sheriff. "All right, so I took the saddle! It's up in the church belfry."

"In the church belfry! Of-all-places!"

Amazement held him speechless for a moment.

"Now, listen, you get that saddle and bring it into town as fast as you can ride!"

Rud's eyes were slits in his lean, hard face, but his voice was softer than ever. "You get it, Mister. When *I* wanted it, *I* got it!"

"You—you! Some day—some day—Rud Gleason!"

Katie was back again, just in time to save the sheriff from a stroke.

"Won't you set, Sheriff Beal, and have a bite with us? Just cooked up a nice mess of venison."

THE sheriff steadied himself. "Ahn—no, thanks, Mrs. Gleason. Gotta be on my way." He turned, and was almost at the door when he halted like a roped steer. "Venison! Out of season! Where did you get venison?"

Katie's voice was sympathetic. "Why, Sheriff! The poor deer wandered up to the back steps and died. I almost cried. Poor critter!"

Beal's face and temper flamed again. "You—you—Gleasons! Some day—some day, I tell you!"

He whirled, and the door slammed behind him, as he rushed into the night. There was a sudden crash and then a clatter followed by a volley of lurid oaths.

Jimmy picked a tooth reflectively. "Should've taken that bottle off the steps before like I meant to."

Rud's lips curved into a dry smile. "Reckon you should have, pa."

His mother looked at him. "Rud, you'll be the death of me yet! You and your father. Why is the sheriff always abotherin' you? Tell me, what does he want?"

"Rose Terry."

Rud's answer was laconic. "He's been after her for years."

His father grinned up at him. "Nothin 'to worry about, Rud. Us Gleasons was always devils with the women!"

Katie's voice was sour. "And smart, too. And sober. Oh-h!"

"Anyways," Rud said, "she likes me better. So I reckon he'll have to lump it."

His father stared at him for a moment. "Beal's afeared of you, Rud. But he ain't the lumpin' kind. Watch your step."

"Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

His mother cut in. "'Pride goeth before a fall,' the Good Book says."

Jimmy looked up at her. "Woman!"

"'And look not upon the grape when it is red.'"

"Bah! Let's have the jug, Rud."

He drank the rest of his meal in silence.

THE Gleasons had been asleep about an hour when a sudden sound woke Rud. In an instant he was on his feet, gun in hand. His lanky frame glided silently to a window, and he peered out cautiously. But the dim moonlight revealed nothing.

"Must've been dreamin'."

He returned to his cot, only to be brought back to his feet by a loud knock at the door.

"Who is it?"

"Sheriff Beal."

"All right. Come on in."

He stooped to light the lamp on the table beside his cot. In the next room he could hear his mother and father stirring. The sheriff came in as before with a rush. Two men followed him, guns in their hands.

"Rud Gleason! You're under arrest! This time you've *done* it!"

"What're you talkin' about?"

It was Jimmy, his long underwear flapping around his bowed legs. "Done what? What's he done? Why don'tcha stop botherin' decent people! Gettin' 'em up all hours of the night!"

"I'll tell you what he's done! I found that saddle in the church belfry . . ."

"Hurray for you!" Jimmy grunted; "what do you want us t'do now—howl? What're you up to anyway?"

"Plenty!"

The sheriff's voice held a note of confidence that had been absent earlier that evening.

"You were pretty slick, Rud, sendin' me for that saddle!"

"I don't get it."

"Oh, you don't, eh? Well, you never thought I'd look any further than that, did you? Guess you must've reckoned me for a fool, all right."

Rud's level voice cut in. "Better stop pattin' yourself on the back and tell us what's happened."

"As if you didn't know! Well, I said some day you'd go too far. We've taken your drunken rows and your thievin' but we won't stand for murder!"

"Get m'gun, Kate!" Jimmy roared, "I'll blast this four-flusher's hide off'n him!"

"Murder!" Rud took a step forward, and the sheriff retreated.

"You yellow coward! What are you tryin' t'pull?"

ONE of the men waved his gun at Rud and backed him up. "Take it easy! I'll tell it quicker." He paused. "Seems as how the sheriff went up to the church to pick up the saddle. He decided to take a look around and see if there was anything else you might've hid up there. Well, he looked behind the old piano."

"And?"

"And he found this hombre there with a hole through his head. He brought him into town and stuck him into a box at Planter's parlor, and then woke us up to come here and get you."

"It's plain as the nose on your face," snorted Beal, "this stranger come by just as Rud was draggin' the saddle into the church, and Rud plugged him. He couldn't take him away in broad daylight so he figured he'd wait until night and then get rid of the body. 'Twould be easy enough."

A deputy grunted. At the rim of the Dakota Badlands there were countless places where a troop could vanish without a trace, let alone a single man.

"Kate, get m'jug! I gotta do some thinkin' about this!"

His wife brought the jug to Jimmy, and he took a long deep swallow. "Ah-h-h! Now I feel better!"

Jimmy turned to Beal. "Y'say you found this here body in the church and then took it into town and stuck it in the funeral parlor?"

The sheriff's voice was sarcastic. "That's right. We ain't got no morgue, you know.

Rud was already dressed, and the men turned to go. Their high heels clomped as they marched him out between them. Three who had remained outside fell in behind, wary of a break, but Rud seemed little disposed to make trouble. They mounted in silence and rode off.

Rud's father was not taking it so quietly, though, and his curses followed them until they were out of earshot. Then he busied himself.

"Fill a bottle for me, Kate. It's a cool night and I'll need it."

While his wife did his bidding he dressed and went out to the barn to saddle up. He stopped just long enough for another nip, then stowed the bottle in his faded jeans.

"Don't worry, Kate," he grinned crookedly down at her. "The Gleasons are hell on sheriffs, too.

He spurred away with a shriek. "Give her forty-four!"

AN HOUR later Rud was behind bars, the jailer and a puncher assigned to guard him, while the others went over to Hanson's saloon to talk it over.

The entire population of the little town was soon awake and joined them at the long bar as the news spread. The sheriff became the center of attention as he told and retold his tale.

He was on the fifth telling when Big Jake Carden strode in.

"What's this about a killin'?" His booming voice drowned all others out. "Who killed who?"

Someone started to answer, "Rud Gleason killed . . ."

There was a sudden silence. Whom had he killed?

When it was explained to Big Jake the black-beard giant snorted. "What're we waitin' for? Let's go over to Planter's and get a look at 'im. Might just be somebody one of us knows."

The crowd followed him across the street and filed into the funeral parlor behind him. It was the one establishment in Harding which was always open.

Someone got a light, and Beal led them into the back room and pointed to the long box. "I was in a hurry so I just dropped him in there."

He walked over and lifted the lid.

A gasp broke from the sheriff and he fell back. Then as the astounded onlookers' eyes popped, the "body" sat up.

"What in hell's goin' on? Can't a body get some sleep?" it mumbled.

Beal had recovered. "Gleason! What have you done with the body, y'drunken sot?"

"What body?" Jimmy cocked one eye listlessly, "Ain't seen nobody here but me." His grin was foolish. "No *body!* Haw! That's funny, ain't it?"

A half-empty bottle came out of his pocket. How's about a drink, boys?"

Beal lifted his fist but Carden stopped him.

"Whoa there, Sheriff! We ain't gonna get nothin' outa Jimmy till he's sober and ready t'talk, so let's lock him up till mornin'."

He bent and lifted the inert figure out of the coffin. "Come on, Jimmy! You can sleep it off in jail."

Gleason was deposited in a cell next to Rud's, who watched the proceedings in silence.

As Carden set him down, Jimmy opened his eyes. "Jail, eh? Last time I was in here I gained twenty pounds! Food's better'n home!" His voice dropped to a whisper. "Stick around, Jake."

If Carden was surprised he didn't

show it. He turned, stepped out and closed the cell door behind him.

"Tell you what, boys," he boomed, "I'll see you at the saloon in a little while. Wanna talk to Fred and Joe here."

AT THE bar in Hanson's the talk was growing louder each minute. Beal leaned back and addressed the crowd.

"We've stood for plenty from Rud Gleason, but this is too much! Why, even hangin's too good for that murderer!"

Down at the end of the bar someone took up the cry. "He oughta be lynched, that's what!"

Beal started a weak protest but others chimed in, "He's right! Lynch him!"

In seconds the crowd had become a lynch mob.

"Let's drag the skunk out and hang him!"

They started en masse for the door but Beal got ahead of them. At the doorway, he turned, "Stop, men! You don't know what you're doin'! If he's gonna hang let's do it legal!"

There was a sullen roar from the crowd as it moved toward him.

"Get out of the way, Sheriff, or you'll get hurt!"

Beal ran for the jail. He flew up the steps and slammed the door behind him. The mob could hear his voice, "Don't try it, men! First man to step in I shoot!"

"He wouldn't dare!" someone yelled.

There were shouts of "Break down the door!"

And willing shoulders pounded at it. It splintered under their weight. With a single, blood-curdling yell they surged into the dim hall. At the end of the corridor they could hear Fred yelling, "Here he is! Come and get 'im!"

The next moment the crowd had him, a struggling figure, his handkerchief wrapped around his face and his hands tied behind him.

They fell on him like wolves, and in a moment his shirt was torn from his back. They dragged him, his screams muffled by the bandana, from the jailhouse to the tree a few yards away.

They stood him on an empty keg, and ready hands twisted the rope around his neck, then threw it over the branch above.

There was a struggle for the free end, but Fred got it. He drew it tight.

"Wait, Fred!" came a voice from the crowd, "we wanna see his eyes pop when he swings!"

"Yeah! Tear that handkerchief off his face!"

Someone reached up and yanked the 'kerchief from the pitiful figure's face. A single grunt of amazement came from the crowd.

"Beal!"

They rushed as a man to free him, but were stopped by a roar from behind them.

"Hold it!"

It was Big Jake, a thirty-thirty looking like a pistol in his huge paws. From behind him, Jimmy and Rud materialized, each similarly armed.

Jimmy was cackling gleefully.

"Say, Sheriff," he screeched, "how does it feel to be guest of honor at your own party? What d'you say you give us a speech?"

The sheriff's usually florid face was pasty now and his mouth worked queerly, but no sounds emerged.

"Pull the rope a little tighter!" Jimmy commanded.

Fred yanked, and Beal's feet swung off the keg. For a moment he dangled, his features contorted, and his body twisting from side to side. He struggled to free himself but to no avail.

"Let him down a little now!" Jimmy ordered. "That should've loosened his tongue!"

"I'll talk! I'll talk!" the sheriff croaked.

ALL this time there had not been a sound from the crowd. The turn of events had stunned them. Their heads bobbed back and forth from Jimmy, Big Jake and Rud to the sheriff. It was the strangest hanging the citizens of Harding had ever attended.

Beal was talking now. The words poured from him in a torrent, almost incoherently. "I did it! I tried to frame him! Wanted to get him outa the way! Been eatin' his dust with Rose too long—knew I didn't have a chance!"

He stopped, and Fred gave the rope another yank.

"No! Don't!" Beal shrieked, "I'll talk, I'll talk! Rud Gleason didn't shoot nobody! I framed him, I tell you! Wanted to get him outa the way! Let me down, let me down!" He was crying now.

"Let him down!" Big Jake roared. "He's had enough!"

"Not yet!" someone cried; "let's run him outa town!"

The men closest lifted Beal off the keg and set him on their shoulders, still blubbering. The crowd poured down the main street, tossing the sheriff on their upraised arms like a rag doll. They were soon out of sight. When they returned half an hour later they found Big Jake waiting for them outside the saloon.

He grinned at them. "Looks like you did a good job, boys! But you come awful close to doin' it to the wrong man!"

They looked ashamed. How'dya figure it out, Jake?" someone queried.

"I didn't figure nothin' out! Jimmy Gleason did the figurin'! We can thank him for savin' us from makin' a big mistake!"

"But what did he do with the body?" someone asked.

"That's where Beal was smart," the big man answered. "He knew we'd never believe Jimmy—" He stopped and grinned, "I almost didn't!"

"But where *is* it?" they persisted.

"There never was no 'body'," he replied. "He got you so het up t' string Rud you didn't think t'look, 'cept Jimmy, and it didn't take him more'n a minute t'figure it out. Maybe you remember how surprised Beal was when he saw someone *in* that coffin! That was the clincher for Gleason, but he still couldn't say nothin' cause he knew we wouldn't believe him."

"Whew!" someone whistled in admiration. "We oughta make Jimmy Gleason sheriff of this here county!"

Big Jake grinned and held up his hand. "Whoa-a! Let's not go too far, boys! If we did that we might find the jail missin' some mornin'!"

They were all laughing now.

"Anyway!" shouted Hanson, "his drinks are on me from now on!"

"He musta figured that," said Jake; "he made a beeline for your saloon the minute y'were gone! You're paid up till next summer!"

SHOOTING WIZARD

WITHOUT a doubt, the most accurate man with a gun the West produced for many a year was Wild Bill Hickok. Buffalo Bill said of him, "Wild Bill is the most deadly shot with rifle and pistols that ever lived." And Buffalo Bill had quite a reputation along those lines himself.

The first public test of Hickok's ability came when he applied for membership in the famous Red Legs at Leavenworth, Kansas. There was terror in the land then, brought by night in the form of armed bands raiding and pillaging across the state line from pro-slavery Missouri. The Red Legs were an unofficially organized group of

guerilla cavalry enlisted on the abolitionist's side to resist by force these bandit hordes.

Hickok's request to become one of the Red Legs was refused because he did not own a horse at the time, or have enough hard cash in his pockets to purchase one. The group was made up of volunteers, men who had fully outfitted themselves. Although he was refused, Wild Bill saw his chance and played his cards well. A shooting match was scheduled by the Red Leg Rangers, and Bill went out to watch the men in action. He was determined to shoot with them.

As the pistol shots rang out, Bill tried to attract attention by laughing and jeering every time a contestant missed. Finally the men became annoyed and challenged him. One of them came forward and yelled, "Look a h'yar, boy, you has too much laugh—as if you could do better, and dern my skins even if yer not a Red Leg, I'll give you a chance to shoot. If you takes the prize, you'll get it; and if you don't I'll beat you to death with the hickory ram-rod o' my rifle! Do you shoot on my terms?"

Bill answered quietly and confidently, "I will, and beat you, too."

The tall blond boy took his place in the shooting line. All eyes were turned to him, but his mind was concentrating on his prospects of winning. The first prize was a fine horse, a saddle and bridle. After all the other contestants had taken their turn, Bill took his stand and raising his rifle quickly fired. The first to start the cheering was Jim Lane, the leader of the Red Legs.

"By heaven! The best shot in three hundred." Bill's next two shots followed the first, right through the dead center of the target.

As if that hadn't proven his superior skill beyond any doubt, Bill went ahead and aimed at a moving object which had been set up one hundred yards away. It was a round piece of wood painted red, which was rolled like a wheel along the ground. Three shots were allowed. Just as the wheel was put in motion, a crow flew over the field high above the heads of the crowd. Instantly raising his rifle Bill fired and brought it down. He then seized the rifle of one of the astonished spectators, and throwing it to a level sent a bullet through the red wheel.

Bill was immediately welcomed into the Red Legs company, and was allowed to walk away with all the prizes.

—Carter T. Wainwright.

BETRAYAL IN THE WEST

BECAUSE a trader in America's Golden West committed an unforgivable crime, the history of the Apaches versus the white settlers was a bloody one of revenge. Before 1835 there was a friendly understanding between these peoples. The leading Apache chief was Juan Jose, a fairly well educated youth who had been prepared for the Catholic priesthood, but then chose to return to his people. His warriors were faithful and happy to follow him for he was wise and just and knew the ways of the white man.

James Johnson was one of the traders in Apache country who enjoyed the warm friendship of the noble Indian leader. Juan Jose never lost an opportunity to do a good turn for American hunters, trappers, and traders. Several times the chief had visited Johnson in camp.

A group in the Mexican government put Johnson up to his dirty work. Anxious to rid themselves of the able chieftain who had led many raids in Mexican territory, that government offered Johnson a large bribe to kill Jose.

Johnson did not waste time putting the plan to kill his friend into action. Johnson, under the guise of leading a lost mule train back to the United States, brought a group of men through the territory controlled by Jose. Through his alert intelligence service Juan had heard of the approach of the Americans and also of the plot between the Mexican government and the trader. But he refused to accept it as truth. It was impossible for him to believe that Johnson, his friend, would consent to harm him. He met the traders one evening as they were about to make camp and innocently made known to Johnson the report that had been brought to him by his scouts. Johnson, of course, at once denied any connection with Juan's Mexican foes.

And then the Apache chief made the friendly move which was to spell his doom. He invited Johnson and his party to pass the night with him in the Apache camp.

Johnson couldn't have planned a better opportunity to carry out his black plan himself. The whole company went with the chieftain. When they arrived in the camp, the Indians—men, women, and children crowded around the strangers. One of the white men began to distribute gifts among the group, keeping their attention focussed far from Johnson and the rest of the men. That was what Johnson desired and expected. Concealed under an aparejo on the back of one of the trader's mules was a blunderbuss. It was loaded with balls, slugs, and bits of chain, not quite so serviceable as the modern machine gun, but well adapted to its fiendish purpose. Meantime, one of the traders under the pretext that he wanted to buy a fine saddle mule of Juan Jose's, had drawn the chief aside where the mule was standing. The plan was for the trapper to shoot the unsuspecting chief with his pistol at the same time that Johnson fired the blunderbuss into the crowd. The shots rang out loudly; the terrible deed had been done!

Jose, wounded yet still believing Johnson to be his friend, called out to him for aid as he struggled with the trapper. When Johnson approached the fighting men, Jose seemed to be winning. His knife was poised over the heart of the trapper.

"For God's sake, save my life! I can kill your friend but I don't want to do it." In reply, Johnson shot the chieftain.

For forty years the Apache problem was a festering thorn in the flesh of Americans.

JUKEBOX JUNCTION

By Berkeley Livingston

Yep, those jukeboxes eat up a lot of nickels, and it seemed that in Jukebox Junction a man's life is worth just about the same price!

The shotgun blast and the roar of the six-gun came as one

THE barred door opened on squealing hinges. I recognized the deputy who stood motioning his head for me to come out. It was the one with the scarred eyelid, the one who always had a trickle of black spittle dribbling down his unshaven jaw. He jerked his head again and I threw the magazine I was reading to one side and stepped out of the cell.

"Sheriff wants to see yer," he said. He kept his hand close to the gun butt. I smiled into his reddish eyes and walked ahead.

Sloan was looking out of the single window which his office boasted. The shadows were long on Prescott Street. I could see people passing on their way to the center of town. Sloan swiveled around and waved the deputy out of

the room.

He looked tired. The corners of his mouth drooped, and muscled jaws were slack. He didn't say anything for a few seconds, just looked at me. I began to wonder what was up. The mine owners hadn't pulled a fast deal and . . . ?

"Jed. Jed," he repeated. I noticed his voice was heavy and flat. "I got some bad news for you, boy."

I felt myself go tense. Not outside. I never let myself go sissy there. Years of training not to show emotion had steeled my muscles to that task. But a man can't control his insides. I waited for the rest.

"Your father . . . they found your father," he went on more quickly. "Dead up at Silver Stream camp. One of the Mex's got back there this morning. Found him. I'm going up there now. Thought you'd . . ."

"How'd he die?" I asked.

"The Mex was all excited," Sloan said, as he got up and walked around the desk. "Shot," he said. "We'll see."

He put his arm around my shoulder. I let it stay. Sloan wasn't a company man. He was just another guy caught in the middle. We walked out of his office that way, with his arm still around my shoulder.

THE Plymouth tudor jounced over the last of the road and slithered to a stop by the cabin. Sloan and I got out first, the deputy following. There were a couple of Mexicans standing by the open door. They parted silently as we came up. There was a red haze back there on the upper rim of the Sierra Blanca. And a small cloud of grey dust was settling on the rocky road we'd just come off of.

He was lying in what looked like all the blood in the world. Someone had taken a shotgun, placed it close to his mouth and pulled the trigger. There was a backless chair lying close to his body, its four legs sticking up in the air. Why it made me think of a heifer I don't know, nor why the thought made me want to laugh. If only that some one who was shouting, would only stop.

"*Why? Why?* He was a harmless old man! Why was he killed? What did he do?"

It wasn't till I felt Sloan tugging at my arm, heard his voice:

"Easy, son! Easy now," that I realised it was I who had been shouting that way.

I felt my stomach twist, and wrenched myself free, ran to the door. I felt better after a few seconds, and leaned my head against the tree. There was someone standing beside me. I looked up and saw it was one of the Mexicans.

"I know you, Meester Haywood," he said, speaking in a low hurried voice, turning his head to see whether any one else had followed me. "You union organizers. Good to Mexican man. Give him more money. I tell you. Thees morning, three man come to cabin. Then, 'nother one, in car. I see three mans before. Talcott gang. Never see other before. No. I 'fraid. Hide in tunnel. Stay till hear car and horses go. Hear shots. Scared. Come back later. Find old man."

I looked into his brown, frightened eyes. Fear and gratitude fought each other in the clouded depths. He had told *me* what had happened. But wild horses would not drag the story from him, for others to hear.

The Talcott gang! Every Mexican in the region hated and feared them. And not alone the Mexicans. Ranchers, farmers, mine owners, bankers, all were legitimate prey. They were bandits, thieves, rapacious murderers. But

my father? What had he to do with them?

I had looked away while all that ran through my mind. I turned to ask something from the peon, and saw he had gone. Sloan and the deputy were standing in the doorway. He caught my eye and motioned for me to come back.

"Feel better, Jed?" he asked.

I NODDED wordlessly, stepping past him and into the cabin. This time I saw things, the interior of the cabin. I forced myself to look at everything but the grisly mess on the floor. There was an opening into another section of the cabin. I went through it and saw a cheap iron cot, with filthy mattress, and ragged cotton blankets on it. The blanket had been tossed to one side, as if whoever had been sleeping on it had been disturbed. Scuffed and dust-coated boots lay by the bed. My father's. I remembered he was in stockinged feet. There was an empty whiskey bottle by the bed. Also my father's. It was a cheap Tequilla he preferred.

I walked back into the main part of the cabin. There was a small stove in one corner. A piece of stovepiping hung precariously from it, torn half way to the roof. There was a table set close to the two small windows. Three small glass tumblers made a triangular pattern on its bare surface. I moved the glasses about, one at a time. One of them seemed to stick. There was a film, perhaps a quarter of an inch of liquor still in the glass.

I lifted the glass to my nose and sniffed at it. Then I sniffed at the others. Two had held whiskey. There was no mistaking the odor. But the one which had stuck had held something else, a sweetish-smelling liquid. I tasted it. It felt strange to my tongue, though I knew it wasn't whiskey.

I felt someone press close to my side and looked up. The sheriff was regarding me with intent, sober eyes.

"Well, Jed. What do you think?" he asked.

I didn't say anything, just kept moving the glass in my hand around on the table.

"Look, Jed," he started again. "I want you to know I feel bad about this deal you got. It's tough. But we'll get whoever did it. I promise you."

"The Talcott gang did it," I said gently.

He started, bit his lips, opened his mouth, shut it, and opened it again. I beat him to it:

"I know. Don't ask me how I know. I just know. Why? That's something I'm going to find out. You gotta let me loose, Sloan. You just gotta."

I'd hit him in a bad spot. I could almost see the wheels go around in his skull. I knew what the answer'd be. I could have given it to him in the exact words he used.

"I'm sorry, Jed. I can't. Not because you're up for something. But I can't let you take justice in your own hands. That's why I'm sheriff, to see that things like this get taken care of."

He waited for me to say something. When he saw I wasn't, he went on:

"Guess we'd better be startin' back. It's gettin' dark. And I want the undertaker to get here. Ain't right for him to lay here that way."

HE TOOK my arm, as if to help me, like I was sick, and we walked out into the twilight. The deputy was already in the driver's seat. We got in and he put the car in gear. I didn't look back when we made the bend in the road. There wasn't anything I could do for him back there. There *was* something I was going to do, though, but that would take time, and freedom.

I'd marked the place well when we passed it on the way up. I relaxed against the seat, waiting for that moment when the driver would have to come to a stop almost to negotiate the turn. Sloan must have thought I needed consoling because he kept talking. It was all right with me. I wanted him to be at ease, unaware of my intentions, until the second I acted.

"I've known you and your brother, Tom, a long time," he said. "You and he were born in this country. And your father came out here before the King Cut was found. Things changed since then. Your daddy never did like to be shut up anywhere, that's why he sold those claims. Said he wanted to give you and your brother educations. You got it. Tom didn't."

He stopped, clucking with his mouth, like a hen rounding up her chicks before dark.

"But that's in the past. Look, Jed. The company'd call it quits, let you go free if you'd . . . ?"

That got me. I knew he'd arrive at it sooner or later. I spoke in a low voice though I was at red-heat inside.

"Sure. I got an education. At one of the best mining schools in the country. But what the hell did you think they taught us, knitting? They taught us how little chance we stand against the big boys. That's why I became a union organizer. So that some of the little guys would have a chance. They've got me blocked. But only until I get out. Remember that! Only till I get out."

Sloan fell silent. He'd heard all this before. I only said what I did to make conversation. Another few minutes and the need for conversation would be ended. And we were there. I felt the car slow, saw the driver hunch over the wheel, eyes intent on the road, and swung at the exact instant the car stopped.

My fist connected with the side of Sloan's jaw. He slumped sideways and my hand dove for the gun in its holster. The driver must have heard me, because I looked up in time to meet his startled glance in the mirror above the windshield. I rammed the gun up against the back of his skull and snarled:

"Don't make a move except to toss your gun over here."

The scarred eyelid blinked at me, and the black spittle ran freer down his chin. But he wasn't that much of a fool to make a break. Not with a nervous hand holding a gun to his head. I shoved his gun into the waistband of my trousers, opened the door with my free hand and kneed the front seat up.

Sloan came out of his daze then, and looked blankly at me for a second.

"Sorry I had to do it this way," I said. "But this is one matter I'm going to settle by my lonesome. Now don't be damn fools! Get back to town. Don't try to tail me because I'm not giving a damn when I start shooting."

Sloan stopped me while I still had one leg in the car.

"Jed! Don't try to take the law into your own hands."

I pulled my leg free, and began to back up the angled wall. I was halfway up the incline, when the car started up again. I watched its tail light disappear around the bend before I straightened up and made the grade at a panting run. There was no need to get oriented. I knew just where I was going. Back to Silver Stream.

THE cabin was dark, and the silence was as one with the darkness. But I knew that the Mexicans were around. They were muckers. It was cold up here. The most likely place for them was in the warm, dank tunnel.

"Hey, hombres!" I yelled. "It's me, Haywood."

A flashlight came to life up above where the tunnel's mouth made a darker patch in the grey walls of rock. I called again and waited. There was a scrambling sound, as if some large animal was on the loose. I tensed for a second, the gun in my hand held low against my hip. Then a soft voice called:

"Senor Heywood. Eet ees you?"

"Yes up here."

"I come," the soft voice said.

I smelled the sour smell of his perspiration, felt his presence, and the light went off. His voice came up to me from below my shoulder:

"I know why you come, senor. Juan Pablo tell you. Talcott gang is in Jacinto. Theese Joe Martin, he has saloon there. No take a chance, senor. Ees planty tough hombres."

Jacinto! Damn. That was hell and gone across Mile High and beyond. I'd need a horse. Good old Juan Pablo, he had one, it turned out.

"I use him for theengs," he explained vaguely. I knew what things. Sometimes cattle came up here for water. His hand was on the horse's neck. "Senor Heywood," he went on. "I have friend in Jacinto. Jose Martines. Ees shoemaker there. Eef you need, tell heem that Juan Areles send you."

I reached down and pressed the slender, muscular hand hard. Then I turned the horse's head toward the trail leading up over Mile High divide.

JACINTO! I remembered it, though it was fifteen years since I'd been there last. It hadn't changed. It only looked more dried up, the store fronts, more weather-beaten, the few houses more ramshackle. Jacinto was not the kind of town in which people build homes. It had started as a mining boom town in the days when silver was king in this region. Then the lode had petered out, and one by one the miners and their families had moved away. Now it was a place of saloons and desolation. It was even too far off the beaten track to be of interest to tourists.

But because it was so far off the beaten track, Jacinto enjoyed a certain notoriety. Here it was that men came to gamble and riot. Beyond the town some ten miles was the beginning of a wasteland of canyon and wilderness in which any wanted man could lose himself for eternity. No sheriff ever bothered coming. They waited until the man or men they wanted came to more civilized parts, as they were certain to do.

I patted the bay's neck. It had done well. Thirty miles over rough mountain trail and desert path since nightfall was damned good. Dust rose in a grey cloud from my clothes as I bent down. Somewhere a door opened on the dimly-outlined street and I heard the sound of a slop-jar being emptied. Soon the town would be awake. My business had to wait till night fall. I had to find the shop of Senor Martines.

I rapped sharply on the wood. I heard echoes reverberate from within the interior. Then the door opened a crack and the dark outlines of a face showed.

"Juan Areles sent me," I said.

The door opened until I was able to squeeze in. I heard the crackle of a match. Light flamed and was transferred to a kerosene lamp. A small, stoop-shouldered Mexican looked up at me through frightened eyes. He wore a moustache of tremendous size.

He muttered something, and I switched to Spanish:

"He told me you would help me. My name is Haywood."

His eyes lit up, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Haywood! I know of you. So Areles sent you to me. What for?"

I didn't hesitate a second. These people hated the Talcott gang. I was sure he wouldn't hesitate in answering any questions.

"I think they have killed my father," I said. "Areles saw them leaving the camp at Silver Stream. I want to clean up, rest up, some sleep . . ." I yawned, and went on, "and after that we'll see. I only hope they're all together."

Martines' face looked up at me with a worried expression creasing the smooth brown brow.

"Who? The Talcott's?" he asked.

I knew I was tired then. I hadn't made it clear. I nodded. He shook his head violently.

"They are not here. Only Joe Martin. He rode in late yesterday afternoon. Alone. I know. I was sitting in front of my shop. Alone, he came."

I FELT myself sway in the grip of my tiredness, saw his eyes become grave in concern, and his arm came around my waist. I grinned down at the man and said:

"All I need is a few hours sleep. My horse is outside the house. Will you . . . ?"

Martines jerked his head toward the rear of the sectioned off store. There was a curtained arch. I saw by the light of the grey dawn the dim confines of a bedroom Martines had made in the rear.

I stumbled wearily into the room and onto the ill-smelling bed. It seemed that my head barely touched the pillow and I was asleep.

I felt the touch of someone's hand on my shoulder and I was instantly awake. Martines leaned over me, his hand giving shelter to his mouth. A finely tooled belt hung from his free arm. My guns lay snugly in the holsters of the belt. Cartridges gleamed softly in the glow of the lamp. I looked my surprise. He smiled and whispered:

"I thought you could put it to use. Now I think the time has come for your awakening. Yes?"

I peered deeply into the warm eyes. Was there a something he wanted to say? These Mexicans spoke in mental double-talk. I knew them well, respected them. He went on:

"Martin's place is the last on the street. There is a rear entrance through a porch reached by a stairway. He has the office in the back. I have been in his place a while ago, and I saw no one else. Something is brewing, because usually there are more than one of the gang there at night. Tonight his place held only the usual run of drunks and gamblers. I have found out for you; his porter is one of my friends, that he counts the receipts at about midnight. Ten more minutes. The window at the rear is open. Understand?"

I understood.

"Your horse is rested, the guns oiled, ready for use. Another thing. I have arranged for some friends to be at the rear when you leave. They will cover your departure."

He leaned away from me, straightened and motioned for me to follow him. My legs felt limber, my body rested. I felt a wild surge of power as I got up and followed him into the star-dust night.

"See. There, that jutting thing. That is Martin's," Martines said pointing to a dim shape in the distance. "No one ever comes down behind the houses, except drunks. Luck to you my friend."

We shook hands formally. And I started out, leading my horse.

NOT even a cat crossed my path. I made sure that the knot I tied in the halter could be loosened instantly. Then I tiptoed up the stairs. It wouldn't

have made much difference. There was so much noise coming from the front I could have played skiprope.

It was a narrow porch with a belly-high railing which stood perhaps ten feet above the sandy ground. I went low as I peered through the single window. Darkness made my search futile. I grinned to myself as I put my hand to the sash. The window was open about an inch from the bottom. The way had been made easy for me all right. It squealed a little as I raised it high. Then I was inside, my hands outstretched, my eyes intent on whatever light came from a crack below the door at the far end of the room.

I felt my way forward, my hands at last feeling the rounded edge of a desk. I moved around it to the door, felt the knob and stationed myself in such a way so that if the door was to swing violently inward, it would not hit me. And I waited.

It seemed that I had not been there for longer than a few seconds. The door swung open, and I heard boots scrape across the floor toward the desk. I timed it perfectly. The light went on and I kicked the door shut, at the same instant bringing both guns out.

He stared at me, open-mouthed. He was hatless, small-shaped, with bowed legs under ragged jeans, worn at the knees. He hadn't shaved in several days and his hair hadn't known the touch of a barber's shears in a long time. I motioned with one of my gunned hands for him to move away from the desk. Anyone looking through the window could have seen us. He moved toward where I gestured, his slitted eyes holding mine in a hypnotized stare. There was fright in those eyes, and cunning too. His mouth moved, jaw muscles jerking, as if he were chewing a cud. Then I had him along the wall. I came close and whispered:

"Take it easy Martin, and you'll live a while."

He shook his head, his eyes glaring at me. I holstered one of my guns and took the bag he had brought in from the saloon. Dropping it to the floor at my feet, I then slipped the gun from his holster and put it in the waistband of my trousers.

Paleness greyed the skin around the beard stubble. Fear stalked his soul now.

"Who, who are you?" he said hoarsely.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"What others?"

"Sam Ivers and Lew Talcott?" I said.

THE animal eyes twisted away from mine. They moved right and left as though in some corner of that room he expected to find a something which would release him from my grip. I only grinned more broadly. I was beginning to enjoy this.

"Well!" I shot out.

"I—I don't know," he quavered after a few seconds consideration. "Wait!" he almost shouted when he saw my gun come up. "I'm tellin' you the truth. I don't know!"

"You left Silver Stream together," I said.

"Yes," he agreed. "But we separated . . ." He stopped suddenly. He must have seen something in my face. "What do you know about Silver . . . ?"

"Which one of you killed my father?" I asked. Suddenly I felt nothing. My mind no longer registered impressions. There was only the reality of sound, smell and sight. This thing before me had given himself away. But there had been others with him. He was going to tell me where those others were. And who had pulled the trigger of that shotgun.

"What do you mean?" his voice was a trickle of sound in the terrible silence of that room.

I suddenly realized why I had come here. To kill. I had never killed before, although I had seen men get killed. And I knew it wasn't something one does out of a natural love. I knew that death, the way I was going to deal it, was like a seed which had bloomed out of an evil flower planted by these men.

"Martin." my voice was under control, so low he bent forward a little, the better to hear. "My father was killed by one of the Talcott gang. They were seen leaving the place immediately afterward."

"So what?" Martin asked. He had courage of a kind. The kind a rat has. "Are we the only ones who use a . . . I mean . . ."

I slapped him then, with the side of the gun. That was twice he had given himself away. His head slammed against the wall, and a streak of blood furrowed the side of his jaw. His mouth was slack and a trickle of spittle dribbled down his chin.

"How the hell do you know how he was killed?" I asked.

He stared at me, his eyes big, now. I liked him better that way. His shoulders were firm against the wall, but his legs sagged at the knees.

"Who did it? And why?" I asked.

He shook his head. I lifted the gun again. His hands came up in front of his face.

"Wait! I'll—I'll . . ."

HIS eyes had suddenly swiveled toward the window. I turned my head for the barest second. It was the oldest of tricks and I fell for it like a schoolboy. It was only for a second, but in that second he took the chance of diving at me. I shifted my body just as he hit me low, his arms around my knees. He was hollering like a madman, words which held no meaning, sounds only for help. As I pivoted, I swung down in a clubbing motion, the gun barrel catching him a glancing blow at the side of the skull. He shut up then. But the damage was done. I heard the pounding feet racing up the stairs. His hands had my knees in a death grip. Once more I swung down as hard as I could. The hands relaxed their grip and slid down until they were resting against my ankles. I kicked them away, just as the door swung open.

I threw the gun up, at the single bulb in the light fixture, and shot it out, simultaneously leaping for the window. There was a blinding flash and the booming sound of gunfire from the few inches of space I had allowed to be open in the window. I felt nothing, only heard the scream of a bullet passing. Then I was through the window, glass scattering before me. Even as I swung over the rail, I heard someone's feet scuttling down the stairs. I landed in a heap, recovered, tore the halter loose and leaped into the saddle.

The bay loped away like a frightened rabbit. Behind me there was the sudden and amazing glow of a bonfire. Martins' friends, I realized. That was what he had arranged for. The whole damned alley was ablaze. They had soaked the sand with gasoline or some inflammable material and had set it afire.

There was a wide space between the walls of two houses and I set the horse's head toward it. We sped past just as lights blazed up inside. Then we were beyond the last barrier, into the open desert, beyond which opened the huge walls of a canyon. I let the bay have his head.

A half mile of desert, then the slow rise of the plateau. It wouldn't take

them long to organize a chase. There was a full moon. I had to make the hills before they got started. I had bungled the whole job. They knew who I was and why I had come. Martin would warn the other two. Two? Areles had said there were three. So lost in thought was I that I didn't know we were safe until the bay slowed down of its own accord and I had to look to see why. We had reached the flat height of the mesa. To the right was the drop of the canyon wall, to the left the slope down into the desert, and straight ahead the darkness of the forest melting into the greyness of towering rock. I was safe. They wouldn't go this far.

CHAPTER II

Sam Ivers

I HAD been sitting against the smooth roundness of the boulder for the better part of two hours. I had done a lot of thinking in those hours. I sighed heavily, and got to my feet. All my thoughts had led to a single conclusion. That, as a revenging force, I had bungled things. I had acted in the most stupid of manners. Yet, how else was I to have gone about it? Now there was nothing else for me to do but return to Cameo and give myself up. Sloan had been right. Perhaps the law *was* slow, but it *was* the proper agency.

But first I had to return the horse to Juan Areles.

* * *

It was broad daylight when I rode up the trail leading to the tunnel. I leaped from the bay letting him find his way alone. The cabin was deserted, and only a great bloody circle showed where my father had died. My head swung up, away from the stain, and I saw where the buckshot had hit the wall in a formless pattern. The whole side of the wall, perhaps an area five feet across had been peppered. I wasn't thinking of anything when I walked up to look.

For a second the tear in the wood didn't make sense. Then I realized it wasn't the mark of buckshot. A bullet had torn through the wood. Someone had fired a shot through the wall. And the splintered part still showed white, fresh, except for a tiny dark streak.

The slug had passed between two planks which had spread slightly, and in passing had torn out a small piece of wood.

I became conscious of the unnatural silence. I knew there had been something peculiar when I rode up the trail. The drive of pneumatic hammers was missing. There was no one in the camp. I ran up the graveled ramp to the tunnel. Two dump trucks lay overturned beside a section of track. The tunnel mouth smelled damp. I peered in and heard the scurrying sounds of rats scamper off into the darkness. I started to turn away and became aware of a strange something, a gnawing sound.

I stepped into the tunnel, my guns out.

Somebody had beaten me to it. He had been a nice guy, the little Mexican who lay at my feet, his head half-blown off by a blast from a shotgun, the same one, I had no doubt which had taken my father's life. The rats had been busy at him. He wasn't the kind of sight for love.

And the damnable part of it was that maybe they were separate murders.

ALL the way back to the country road, some three miles from Silver Stream, I pondered over the situation. Silver Stream had been an abandoned copper claim which had been flooded out a year or so back. Then the opera-

tors had decided to install pumps. When I returned to Cameo two months before to help the union organize the miners I heard my father was in the vicinity. Although I hadn't seen him in a long time I made no efforts to get in touch with him. He and I had had a difference of opinion about some trivial matter and knowing his stubborn nature, I decided against re-opening old sores.

The region around Mile High had been stripped years before of any mineral wealth it may have possessed, so I couldn't understand why my father made the cabin on Silver Stream his hide-out. He was a gold prospector in the old-time sense of the word. A desert rat, a mule man, quartz and sand were what he was interested in.

My thoughts switched to what Areles had told me. The Talcotts, he said, had been there. And another who had driven away in a car. Well, the Talcotts were three; Joe Martin, Sam Ivers, and Lew Talcott. Everything tallied. The Talcotts were notorious for one thing, their use of sawed-off shotguns in their activities. Small town banks and gambling places were their specialty. But the fourth man, who was he?

And why had they separated?

Suddenly a picture of my brother, Tom, popped into my mind. Tall, lean, good-looking, he had an incurable temper, and a wild streak in him which had always led to trouble. The last I heard of him he was somewhere in Arizona, running a joint in Tulara, a town almost as famous as Las Vegas. I wished he were here. My feet turned over some small stones and I came back to the present. I was on the county road.

My luck stayed good. A small truck came along after a very short wait and the driver stopped, leaned toward me and invited me to hop in.

I felt his glance from the corner of my eye. Then he said:

"How far you going?"

"Jucaba Junction," I said.

He spat tobacco juice out his window and said:

"Kinda risky, isn't it, Haywood?"

I was becoming quite famous the way these strangers knew me by sight.

"Why?" I asked.

"Look," he said, stopping the truck suddenly and facing me. "I know who and what you are and that's the reason I'm tellin' you this. But Joe Martin was killed last night over to Jacinto and they swear it was you did it. Personally, I think you oughta get a medal for it. But that's neither here nor there. Important thing is that Sloan's out for you." He stopped and a reflective light gleamed in his eyes. "Come to think of it," he said slowly, "maybe that's the smartest thing. Jukebox Junction. You got lots of friends there, Haywood. Guys like me, workin' stiffs."

My jaw popped open, and he grinned at me.

"Sure. Guys like me. Damn it to hell! That's what I'm goin' to do, take you to Juketown. Furthermore, I know the guy who'll take care of you."

ALL this was a little over my head. The business of Martin's death was a complete surprise to me. I knew I hadn't killed. Then I remembered the shot as I leaped from the window. Someone else had a reason for killing him. Good.

The driver went on. "Slim Henerson. Owns the Clay Pigeon. Used to be a machinist on the Silver Stream before it got washed out. What say, Haywood? No, and I can drop you off this side of the line."

"I'll chance it," I said.

Jucaba Junction, sometimes called, Jukebox Junction, but usually just

Juketown, was in effect a suburb of Cameo. The miners, mill hands, and all the menial help of the King Cut, the largest copper claim in the world, lived in Juketown. The driver was right. They would give me shelter and protection. Going back to give up on breaking jail from an injunction against picketing and facing a murder charge were not one and the same thing.

The Clay Pigeon was a gaudy place, neon-lighted in bright colors to attract attention. The lights were out but the door was open and the jukebox was going full-blast. There were half a dozen miners at the bar. Three of the seven booths had kids in them, the inevitable bottles of cokes in front of them, their faces intent on the blaring music.

Slim Henerson was a lank individual with a vacuous expression and an Adam's apple of gigantic proportion. He was standing at the back end of the bar reading the Cameo News.

We walked up to him and sat down on the stools at that end. He didn't bother looking up, but asked, "What'll it be, gents?"

"Lookit, Slim," my friend said.

Grey shaggy brows lifted, and a pair of vacant brown eyes looked into mine. There was no change of expression in them, as without a word, he gestured with his head for us to follow him. He waited till we preceeded him into the back room, then closed the door.

"Set, gents," Slim said. And after we were comfortable, "Tough luck about your old man, Haywood. And don't worry none about Martin. 'Bout time someone got to work on the Talcott's. Too bad you didn't get the rest."

I was curious about several things, one of which was Sloan's reaction to Martin's death. Jacinto was in his county.

Henerson answered my question:

"Sloan don't care too much about it. Matter of fact he's easy in his mind that one of 'em's gone. Only thing is, Jason is hot on your getting free. An' he's riding Sloan's tail about it."

I damned Jason. He was the managing director, the big wheel in the absence of the Eastern outfit who owned King Cut, and since the strike of the miners he hated my guts. Had all this happened two weeks before, I would have been up a creek without a paddle. But I had done the damage before he had me jailed on the injunction. The strikers had become organized. Still, he had the power to make things hot for me.

Henerson saw the expression of worry on my face.

"Don't worry none about it," he said. "Ain't nobody gonna take you outa here. Not while this is Juketown. No company man comes around without gettin' his pants hung up around his neck."

IT CAME to me then that my staying here would be a mistake. No matter if I were innocent of Martin's slaying, logically, the best thing for me to do was to surrender to Sloan. I said as much.

The driver and Henerson called me all kinds of a fool. And the more they disagreed with my decision, the more I saw myself in the right. Finally Henerson shrugged his bony shoulders, looked down the length of his nose at me and said:

"It's your funeral, Haywood. I don't like Jason's sudden interest in the whole business. And he's got a lot of goons in town. What's more, I saw Sam Ivers ride in a while ago. There's a bad smell around. I don't like it."

Nor did I. My streak of stubbornness was greater, however, than their powers of persuasion.

Presott Street was the main artery of

the town and like an artery, the life blood, the human beings which made up the town, moved in their own peculiar fashion down the street. No one noticed me. I was just another puncher moving along. Even the guns slamming gently against my thighs drew no more than a passing glance.

As I stood on the last of the stone steps leading to the door of the jail I could see the broad shoulders of someone standing in Sloan's office. His back was to me, and he looked familiar.

The deputy's chin dropped to his chest, almost, when he saw me enter the office. Sloan, on the other hand, only lifted a pleased eyebrow.

"Glad to see you back, son," he drawled.

My eyes were centered on the third man in the office, however. Henerson had been right. Jason hated my guts. It was to be seen in the way he looked at me, in the way the lean, tight mouth tightened in a wolfish grimace of delight. Jason was glad to see me all right. Nor was he long in making clear the reason for his look of delight.

"And so am I," he said. "That makes it easier than we thought, eh, sheriff? Much simpler. And I don't mind telling you, Haywood, it's a load off my mind to have you behind bars."

I gave him a pleasant grin, and said, "I'll bet. And it'll be a greater pleasure if you could pin that Martin killing on me. Only it won't stick."

He called me something I won't repeat. I forgot the guns at my side. There was only that sneering face in front of me. And I was going to hammer it into something that resembled hamburger, I hoped. The desk was in front of me. But I went over it in a single hop. He saw me coming and backed up, his right hand going high to his shoulder for a gun he carried in a shoulder holster.

It's a funny thing, but when things happen fast, faster almost than a man can tell, there are the little things that instinct calls to mind. I didn't see, because the deputy was standing behind me, but I somehow felt him start toward me as I went into my diving act. And through the corner of my eye, but only in a hazy sort of way, I saw Sloan come erect in his chair. I could have sworn there was a smile on his face as he watched me. Then there was only the face and body of the big guy.

And my fists were hammering at him. He was down, blood all over his mouth and dripping into his shirt. His whole damned face was a red smear. I wanted only to beat and kick the very life out of him. I heard someone shout. And felt for an astonishing instant, the impact of a blow. That was all.

I HEARD someone say:

"God damn, but he's heavy."

My head drooped wearily around. It felt as though it didn't belong to me. Dimly, through pain-filled eyes, I saw the elderly body of Sloan beside me. He was looking at me in the strangest way. Then a cell door opened protestingly and I was dropped on the slatted bareness of the bunk.

I moved my jaws. They ached like I'd had a toothache and had it pulled. There was a numb feeling in my skull. Whoever hit me hadn't been fooling. I had an idea that he wanted to make sure I was out and maybe more.

"That wasn't smart, Jed," Sloan said.

"I wasn't trying to be smart," I said bitterly. "I wanted to kill that bastard!"

"Murder's a hard thing to get away from," Sloan said.

I looked at him sharply.

"You mean you don't believe I killed Martin?" I asked.

"Let's say I have my doubts," Sloan said, smiling.

"Then what am I doing here?" I asked.

The smile left his face. "I'm still the sheriff, boy," he said. "And there's enough evidence against you. Now wait," he broke in over a protest I started. "My feelings don't enter into this. I told you before that there's a legal way out of things. If you'd of followed my advice, you wouldn't be here."

I leaned back, my head against the cool brick of the back wall of the cell and closed my eyes. Sloan was right. There wasn't any question in my mind about that. He broke into my thoughts.

"I got into touch with Ed Fogarty, the lawyer. He'll be here in a little while. You and he can talk this over. Hell, boy! There must be something you can use for proof."

I got it then. I was being framed. Sloan was telling me in his way to get together with Fogarty and rig up some kind of satisfactory story. But what kind. I *had* been to Jacinto.

Sloan turned and walked to the cell door, and swinging it open, said:

"Of course I'm going to demand an autopsy, Jed. Those guns you brought with you . . . they are the ones you've had all the time?"

I shook my head, yes.

He nodded in a satisfied manner. "Well, Hogan," he said to the deputy standing in a dark corner, "let's go. And take care of those guns."

There was something fishy in the smile the deputy gave me as he walked out. I didn't like the guy.

I PULLED the string and the light came up in the single bulb which served to illuminate the cell. My watch said that Fogarty was taking his time about seeing me. From somewhere in front there was a confusing sound of voices. They became more distinct and separate. I heard more than one man's voice shout, "Let's kill the murderin' bastard!"

Suddenly there were several shots. Someone screamed in pain. And feet pounded down the corridor and came to a skidding halt in front of my cell. It was the deputy. The fear of death and worse was in his face. And something else. But that emotion I couldn't figure then. The key tore the bolts open and his voice screamed at me:

"They've come to lynch you. Quick man! Get out!"

He shoved me toward the rear. I twisted away from him and faced him.

"What's happened?" I demanded.

"A lynch party. They killed Sloan. And they want you. Get out the back way."

"Alone, unarmed?" I asked.

He shoved two guns at me. "Here. Take these." He was slipping a bar from its fastenings. I looked back. The long corridor was empty, but I knew in a few moments it would be filled with screaming men, thirsting for my blood. And the thought hit me. Why weren't they here now? Then the deputy had the last of the bars off, the door was swinging wide and his arms were at my back shoving me again.

There were three steps down to the pavement at the rear of the jail. What made me duck, I don't know. But I did, luckily. The slug screamed off into the night. I swiveled around and whipped my guns out at the same time. His face was outlined in moonlight. Then hot lead ripped into him. He coughed softly and kind of bent in the middle. I didn't wait to see him fall. The mob was coming and at their head was Jason. I knew then what had happened.

Death was at my back. I had to

outrun it. Turning, I raced swiftly for the safety of the street. There was a wall in front of me with a small barred gate in the middle. I hurdled it without breaking stride. Perhaps that was what saved me. They must have thought I'd come walking through. Certainly the exit I did make was unexpected.

There were perhaps ten of them, mostly armed with rifles. They stood on either side of the gate, hidden by the concrete of the walls. Then they too were behind me and I was racing up the shadowed street.

I HADN'T a chance in the world and I knew it it. No man can outrun a bullet. And those guys with the rifles were stationed there just in case I managed to get free. They were already sending out the hot, singing lead and the first slugs whistled past me. The next wouldn't miss.

I hit a street corner, darted around it to the momentary protection of a row of store fronts, and ran down the street they fronted on. I turned and threw a half dozen shots toward the still empty corner, on the chance they would give me a few more seconds of much-needed time.

There was a small dark sedan cruising at slow speed toward me. I saw it half-way down the street. Suddenly it swerved in toward the curb. A head was shoved through the rear side window. As I started to pound past, the man called:

"Haywood! It's me, Henerson. This way."

The door swung open and I accepted the invitation with heartfelt thanks. There were three other men in the sedan. And they were all armed. Henerson shoved me to the floor, whispering as he did so, "Down, fella. Don't want those goons to see you."

But they had. A wild burst of gunfire filled the shattered peace of the night. And was answered by the guns of the men in the car. I managed to reach my feet and shoved my two guns out of the shattered glass of the window on my side. We were almost past them, but I had to show my defiance.

We were on Presott Street. Lights came to life all over. The sounds of the shots had awakened the town. Men stood in doorways, in whatever shadows they could find. We ran a gamut of rifle fire. Glass splintered, the man at my side made a mewing sound and spewed his life blood all over me. I heard the small soft sound of a man's cursing Henerson. I heard the man alongside the driver gasp and knew he was hit in a vulnerable spot, heard Henerson's suddenly bull-like tones, "Damn them! Get through Jake!.. And Jake did. I don't know how, but he did. And we were in Juketown.

The car skidded to a jarring stop on front of the Clay Pigeon. We piled out, Henerson in the lead. The driver, a short, thick-set man whose wild eyes dominated an otherwise ordinary face, shouted for me to get in after Henerson, he'd take care of the men in the car. I ran after the tall thin man.

The place was packed with armed men, who on seeing me enter, burst into a wild clamor of sound. And at the center of all this was Henerson, wild-eyed, bloody, a rifle held like a wooden toy in his right hand and his left upraised in a dramatic gesture.

"Men," he shouted. "Listen. They tried to lynch Heywood. You know who was at the back of this. Jason. An' why? Because Heywood is the guy what's tryin' to see you guys make a living."

There was a roar of voices again. Above them the bellow of Henerson:

"Wait. That ain't all. They're

comin' here to get him. Jake heard some of them goons. Jason's goin' to break this strike one way or another. An' Heywood's the excuse. What we goin' to do about it?"

". . . Lynch Jason" . . . "Wreck Cameo" . . . "Kill the low-lifes" . . . the voices answered.

"Wait!" I shouted, stepping to Henerson's side

THEY gathered around me, breathless with anger.

"Hear me out men," I said. I had handled a Kentucky miner's meeting once that had gotten out of hand, just as this one was, and I remembered something I had done to stop them. "That's what Jason wants you guys to do, wreck Cameo. Whatever has happened to me is being built up by Jason to break the strike, can't you see? Otherwise he'd have just framed me and let it go at that. There must be something else at the back of his mind. And I think I know what it is."

Silence fell at the conclusion of my words. They were interested and that was all I wanted out of them. I went on:

"Sure. That's it. *If you guys go to Cameo and shoot the place up then you're in the wrong!* And he's got you by the short hair. He can call for help. Bring public opinion against you, so that in the long run whatever you will ask for won't be given you. You will be the law-breakers."

"All right, Heywood," someone asked. "What do you want us to do?"

"Listen, now," I said slowly, emphatically. "Sloan is dead. I shot the deputy. Therefore there is no one in authority left unless the mayor appoints someone. And that someone will be a company man. There's no doubt of that. There's nobody they want except me. But the way I've figured it out, they expect you boys to come to my rescue. When you boys got me out that was the unexpected. The deputy was supposed to kill me and say that he did it while I was trying to escape."

Shouts of surprise greeted my words. I went on:

"There was the set-up. Henerson and his friends played right in Jason's hands. Don't go the rest of the way. Let me stay hid here. Let them come here for me. And if they try force, then let them have it. Get it?"

For an answer, Henerson pounded my shoulder with a calloused, muscled palm. Broad grins lighted the faces of the miners. They'd gotten it all right.

Henerson took over then. "Heywood," he said. "You stay here. The back room'll be all right. There's a cot back there. Now the rest of you men scatter around, to Black Mike's, and the Water Hole, and the rest. Keep lights out and rifles ready. If I know those boys they'll be here pretty quick. Let 'em come. But don't start anything until either I or Heywood gives the sign."

"Hey!" a voice called from the doorway. It was the driver of the car. We had forgotten him and his load of wounded. He gestured with his head and some of the men trotted out. They returned in a few minutes bearing the conscious groaning figures of the two who had been shot. Neither had been seriously wounded but there was no question but that their wounds were painful.

"Take them to Doc Gamble," Henerson said.

The sight of the wounded leavened the air of sudden humor which had unaccountably arisen after I had made my suggestion as to the balance of the night. Now the men were again grim and vengeful. Quickly, they scattered,

leaving some ten of them, Henerson, myself and the wounded. Henerson extinguished the lights leaving us in the gloom of a single bulb lighting the approach to the rear room. There were Venetian blinds on the two windows and door. They too were lowered.

I peered through the slanted slats. The street was silent, dark, deserted. Suddenly a river of light flowed down the asphalt. And approaching came the sound of autos. Someone beside me whispered, "Here they come, damn them! Well we'll give them their belly full if they want it."

THERE must have been thirty cars in the procession. And they worked from a pre-conceived plan, because when the drivers worked the cars alongside the curbs they did so at spaced intervals. They were anticipating trouble. The lead car parked in front of Henerson's place. And from it three men stepped out. Two hung back and let a tall, thick-shouldered man, who wore a wide-brimmed Stetson, take the lead. Without hesitation, he walked toward the Clay Pigeon.

It wasn't till he was a few feet from the entrance that I noticed the weapon he carried under his right arm. It was a shotgun, sawed off close to the stock.

He stopped just short of the door, and let the other two catch up to him. Then he shoved the Stetson to the back of his head and yelled:

"Henerson!"

Someone moved softly across the floor to my side. It was the lanky proprietor of the Clay Pigeon.

"What does he want?" he whispered.

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Won't do any harm to ask."

Henerson shouted, "Yeah. What do you want?"

"Heywood. And we're going to get that murderer, one way or another. So take you choice, man."

"It's Sam Ivers," Henerson said.

The name sent a flood of blood to my face. That and the sight of the shotgun. Suddenly I didn't give a damn if he had a thousand men with him. He was one of those who had killed my father. Before Henerson divined my intentions, I had the door open and was striding out to meet him.

Instantly, the rest of the men came after me. And as though it were a signal, the rest of those hidden in all the juke joints on the street boiled out to the pavement. The makings of a grand riot of bloodshed were in the open, now. But all I had eyes for was the tall heavy man directly in front of me. The single light standard in front of the Clay Pigeon illuminated the man's features so that they were imprinted indelibly on my mind.

The guns the deputy had given me swung loosely in my hands. I walked forward, slowly. I could see a twitching muscle high on his cheekbone. His eyes held mine, then, as I came closer, moved restlessly from side to side. And as I approached I kept a watchful eye on the two men beside him. When I was just a few feet from him I stopped.

"Well. Here I am," I said.

He licked his lips, turned his head aside, from one to the other of his friends, and finally brought them back to face mine.

"Better come peaceably, Heywood," he said. "I been deputized to bring you in."

"And suppose I don't come peaceably?" I asked.

I could see the decision in his eyes. The shotgun lifted a little. I let my hand stay lax. Suddenly he smiled. It threw me off. I was expecting him to take the chance of beating me to

the draw. And as he smiled, the man on his right laughed aloud. I turned my head to see what he was laughing at. And Ivers swung the shotgun into firing position. Someone behind me shouted a warning, and the two with Ivers drew their guns.

MY HANDS streaked down, came up with guns blazing. Somehow I managed to throw myself to one side. There was a blast of fire from the shotgun, a wild scream of rage from dozens of throats and the whole street exploded into an inferno of sound, of smell and bellowing voices.

The guy on Ivers' right fell forward on his face, the one to the left spun half around and dropped to his knees. There was a look of disbelief on his face. The whole front of his shirt had turned crimson. But I only saw this as a sort of background to the real drama of Sam Ivers and myself.

I hit the ground and rolled over, at the same time I kept shooting away. I saw Ivers stagger, the gun in his arm fall to the ground. Somehow I managed to get to my feet. I knew I'd been hit. Several times. Funny, but I'd never even heard the bellow of the shotgun. Someone was at my side, his arm under my armpits, pulling hard at me, and his voice shouting instructions in my ears, "Get up, Heywood! Damn it man, get up!"

I staggered around for a few seconds, trying to make my feet stand still. I became aware of the absence of sound. The shooting had stopped. And Ivers was no longer there. That made me forget my wounds and the sudden tiredness which overcame me before. I dragged myself free of the hands holding me. Only when Henerson said:

"Wait, Heywood. The shooting's over," did I realize he was speaking the truth.

I turned a wondering face to him. When had I missed Ivers' disappearance? "Huh?" I asked. What happ . . .?"

"You got Ivers," Henerson said. "He staggered away. To that car." He pointed to a large black sedan directly across from where we were standing.

There were perhaps twenty men gathered around the car. All around them, but at a safe distance were the men of Juketown. I became conscious of other things. A body lay sprawled across the lip of a curb near us. Another lay face up in the gutter, its arms folded over its eyes as if it had gone to sleep and was shielding its eyes from the glare of the sun. But it was in Ivers I was most interested.

The door to the car was open. I saw the bent back of someone who was leaning his weight into the rear of the car. The man straightened, turned and said something to those outside.

"Hey, Heywood," one of them called. "Come over here."

"Don't do it," Henerson cautioned.

But I had gotten the urgency in the man's voice. He wanted me to come over because of something in the car and I surmised that it was Ivers who was in the car.

HENERSON and another walked at my side as I strolled to the man. They parted as I came up. Someone shoved a flashlight's blaze to illuminate the interior and I stuck my head inside. Ivers was stretched out on the back seat, his head pillowed on a coat. His eyes were open but they had no concentration in them. They looked blankly at me when I bent over him.

"Ivers," I said softly. "You wanted to see me?"

His lips opened and closed several

times and a look of intense pain crossed his features as he made a great effort to concentrate. I saw for the first time that I had hit him, and more than once. One of the bullets had torn off his right ear and the wound gaped sickeningly. But the one which had done the damage had taken off more than an ear. It had torn into his throat. I didn't see how he was going to be able to tell me anything. For the moment he opened his mouth and a flood of blood ran down his chin. Yet he did manage. I bent low.

"Hey . . . Heywood . . . Listen. Lew . . . I an' . . . we kill . . . your father. Dyin . . ." that was all. He was dead.

I backed out. They saw by the expression on my face that he was dead. One of them said, "Guess that ends that. Now what?"

Henerson took over.

"I'll tell you what. Get the Goddamned hell out of here. All of you men. You've caused enough damage and trouble. And take that rotten thing with you."

CHAPTER III

Lew Talcott

THERE were a whole string of cars coming down the highway behind us. It was Henerson's idea. Ivers' death had left the Talcott gang with a single member, Lew Talcott, the leading figure, the brains and inspiration of the trio. He had taken the lead away from me against my advice.

"Sure, Heywood," he said as we jolted down the graveled county road which led to Jacinto, "Sloan was right. But now he's dead. Talcott and Jason are running in cahoots. It's evident from the way Ivers showed up. Why did he make him a deputy if they were partners? And did you notice the men in the gang that showed up for the business in Juketown. Labor goons all of them. I recognized at least twenty men. That's why I say go to Jacinto. Get them where they hide out. Raze that pesthole."

Nothing I could say swayed him. And the rest of the boys were as set in following his lead.

It was bright dawn when we hit the fork in the road. The right one led into Jacinto. I saw the car first. It had been parked on the shoulder of the highway. When the driver saw our cavalcade approaching, he set his car in gear and hightailed it as fast as he could down toward Jacinto.

He had a half mile lead on us, and a faster car, which by the time we came within smelling distance of Jacinto, had increased to the point where it was almost out of sight. I shifted the rifle Henerson had given me to a more comfortable position and peered intently into the setting sun.

These men in the car with us were vengeful men, angry men, who had seen and heard their friend die. Now they were out to avenge those deaths. And so were those in the car following. Jacinto was in for a hot time, today. Suddenly the driver cursed as he slammed on the brakes. My shoulder hit the back of the seat as I was jammed forward against it by the sudden stop. I recovered and leaped out after Henerson, who was closest to the door on the right hand side. Immense sections of four-by-fours had been placed across the road as blocks. The driver hadn't seen them because of a curve in the road.

A voice bellowed from behind the jam of lumber, "Stay put!"

I grinned to myself. 'Stay put.' Not these men. They were going through, hell or high water. But how I won-

dered. I knew that there were armed men behind the barricade. I couldn't see them. But I could feel the yawning holes of rifles ready to let loose at us at the first move we'd make to advance. It had Henerson stymied too.

I looked closely at the barricade. They were just a number of the two-by-fours thrown against each other haphazardly. If something heavy, moving at even a small speed hit them, they'd fall apart. For example, a car.

"Come on," I said to the tall, lanky guy at my side.

He followed me at a run back to the car. In the meantime the other cars had come up and parked as best they could on the narrow two-lane gravel road.

"Get in there," I said to Henerson, "and tell the driver to wait for my signal. I'm going to line up three other cars, so that they're all the way across the road from shoulder to shoulder. Then we're going to ram that barricade. Let the rest wait until we hit it. Then wherever there's an opening they'll pile through."

HENERSON grinned broadly in glee at the words. I turned and ran to the first of the cars and told each of the drivers what to do. The men inside, I told to lay low until we'd gotten through. When I had made clear my plan of action to all the drivers, I returned to our car and got in the front seat with the driver.

Four motors raced in simultaneous rhythm. My hand waved a signal, and the drivers put the cars into gear. We were about a hundred yards from the barrier, far enough so that we could gain enough speed either to crash or damage the cars beyond repair. But I hadn't heard a single voice of dissent from the men.

We must have been going sixty miles an hour when we hit those huge sections of lumber. I braced myself against the floor board just as we crashed. There was a momentary shock, and we were through. And before us a group of wild-eyed and frightened men scattered across the desert. I turned to see how the others had made out and saw that they too were past. And Jacinto lay just ahead of us.

We raced into town and came to a screeching halt at a weather-beaten frame shack whose single window bore the legend, saloon. It had been Henerson who had directed the driver to the spot. It was Talcott's place, just as Ivers and Martin also had saloons in the town. And behind us the rest of the auto cavalcade pulled to a halt. We didn't wait for the rest. I was first through the door. A lank frame was disappearing into a back room.

I piled after him. Talcott, for it was he, turned a startled and slightly bewildered look at me, with his side to the rear door, then pulled frantically at the knob. In the second it took for the door to open, I was on him. I jerked him away from it, and shot my fist to his face.

He was as tall as I, maybe an inch taller, but thinner. My blow sent him staggering. I didn't wait for him to get his balance, but drove for him, head down. And was met by a pile-driving fist. The room whirled in a dizzying circle. He had caught me squarely on the nose and the shock of the punch made me pause. I had dropped the rifle the second I had entered the back room and saw that I could get to him. Besides, I wanted to settle this face to face, with my fists pounding his face to a pulp. The thought of the rifle protruded into my mind now. I went back a few steps to recover my balance. Then he was on me again, his fists pounding at my face.

I made no shakes at footwork. This was just slugging, toe to toe, and damn the weakest. Once more that bony, calloused fist got to me. I staggered back into someone who said, "Let me kill the bastard."

I turned and saw it was the driver of the car. He had his gun out and the light in his eyes told me that he would have liked nothing better than to have to pump a few shots into Talcott. I shoved him back, saying: "I'll take care of him."

TALCOTT stood in the center of the room, a snarl on his mouth, his teeth bared in a grimace of hate and fear. There was a cut at the corner of his mouth. I hadn't even felt my fist land there. For that matter I hadn't been conscious that I had even struck a blow. His eyes narrowed and he waved me in to him. As I started forward, I had to admit to myself that he had guts. Then we were pounding each other. My head was down against his chest and I was giving him, left and right, left and right, smack in his belly. He seemed to hang on my fists. Suddenly something exploded against my chin. Once more the room was a circling box with me in the center.

"Get up, damn you," a voice said. "Get up, so's I can give you more."

I stared in bewilderment at a circle of faces. Not till I saw Talcott's face among them did I realize what had happened. He had knocked me out, momentarily. I rose to my feet shakily, to the accompaniment of shouted encouragement from my friends. The whole right side of my face felt numb from the pounding Talcott had given it. My lungs pumped breath into my nostrils but it was a tortured effort. I staggered forward toward him. Somehow I knew that he too was tired. And the thought that he might be as tired as I, spurred me on.

We practically fell into each other. I hit him in the belly again, and for the first time felt him go back. Relentlessly I moved in, my hands pumping as fast as they could, but higher now, up against the soft flesh of his cheeks. Twice I staggered him. And suddenly he was away from me, and I was stumbling over his body. I fell on him and felt his arms go around me. They clawed up around my neck, then relaxed, only so that he could bring hooking, clawing fingers to my eyes. I brought my head down hard, catching him across the bridge of the nose. A fountain of blood poured in a crimson flood over me. But his fingers were gone from in front of my eyes, and that was all I cared about.

Once more I brought my head down on that broken nose. He screamed in agony. And I echoed his scream. I had somehow bridged a trifle. And his right knee had come up to catch me full in the groin. I rolled away from him. He continued to scream, like a wounded animal, nothing human. I continued to roll trying to reach a sanctuary so that I could get to my feet. He followed me on hands and knees, his eyes twin pools of madness. We came erect simultaneously. I pawed in a futile gesture with a half-opened hand toward him. An idiotic grin appeared on his lips, as he fended off my weak blow. He lifted his right arm above his head, like a hammer is lifted, and brought it down on my skull. There was no strength in the blow, only his weight. But that very weight knocked me to my knees. He looked down at me, his nose leaking blood as though it were a faucet, then with a slow-motion deliberateness he brought his leg back and kicked at my face. Instinctively I raised my arm to fend off the kick. His leg hooked within the half circle of my

arm and I pulled down with it, throwing him to the floor again.

This time we crawled to each other! I knew the instant I reached him that he was through. I lifted my arm and he made a defensive gesture. But my fist slammed through and pounded his head against the floor.

I KNEW I was laughing in a hysteric way, as I fastened my hands around his throat. "For my father," I wheezed. "And for that poor Mex up in the hills." Slowly I squeezed with all my strength at the corded neck. His eyes rolled in his head, and his lips moved weakly around words.

"We di-didn't kill your—father," he whispered.

My fingers relaxed their grip.

"Talk damn you," I shouted. "Who did?"

Somewhere he found some strength.

"Jason did it," he said.

I dragged him to his feet where he hung like a limp rag over my arms. I waited until he had regained his strength somewhat. Then I said:

"Well? Out with it."

"Jason did it. Your father walked in on us while we were going over our plans," he said. "Your father was drunk. But not so drunk he couldn't understand. An' he threatened to spill the beans. Jason had a rifle with him. He shot the old man. Then he grabbed one of our shotguns and blew the top of the old man's head off. He said, 'No one'll think a rifle did the trick."

I remembered the splintered bit of planking, with its bloodstained edge. It had slipped my mind entirely. Especially since I'd found Juan dead. Had Jason also killed him? I asked Talcott that. He shrugged his shoulders wearily. I let him stand free. He fell back a few steps, straightened up, looked bleakly at the circle of scowling faces and said through wryly twisted lips:

"Jason did that too. After the Martin business, we knew that someone had seen us. And the only one who could have was up in Silver Stream. The Mex was the only one. Ivers helped Jason on that deal. He used the shotgun on him after Jason used the rifle.

"You're going to learn the rest anyway. So I might as well spill all of it. Jason was going to break the strike; Heywood, you were going to be framed, first on the strike, then later, when Martin died, on that. Sloan was in our way. So Jason arranged for the deputy to knock him off. We had those goons already in town; it was nothing to arrange a riot. Hell! We figured that with the deputy acting as sheriff there wouldn't be anything to the business of getting rid of you. You were the stumbling block all the way. But you kicked all our plans to hell and gone."

I had too. But there was still the man who was behind all this. Jason.

"Take care of this rat," I said to Henerson, as I turned and started for the door. "I got business back in Cameo."

"Want me to come along?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Have him make a complete confession and have him sign it. Then come after me."

THE barred, barbed-wire gate was open. No watchman stood guard. And the concrete walk leading to the office of the King Cut mine was as bare of humans as the desert is of water. I stepped out of the car, made sure the guns at my hip were free in their holsters, and pushed the gate in. My heels made a hard sound on the concrete walk. I slowed as I reached the four steps leading to the office. The door was open.

There was a screen door beyond the

wooden one. I peered through it but the interior was clothed in shadows. I pushed the screen door with a fast swinging shove and stalked in. And a voice said, "Greetings, friend. I've been waiting for you."

The voice came from somewhere behind and to the right of me. I started to turn, quickly, and stopped.

"Easy, Heywood. This gun is liable to go off," Jason said.

I kept my hands high when I did turn, nor did I make my move quickly. He was standing, his back against the wall, a short-barreled gun close to his hip. The gun was pointed low, aimed straight for my gut. He was smiling broadly.

"Kinda surprised, eh, Heywood?" he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Not particularly," I said.

"No, I guess you're not. So you got Talcott and Ivers," he made it a statement. "And of course you had to follow through. I was the next on your list. But I figured that too. So now here we are."

"Yep," I said, "Here we are. Not that it'll do you any good. Even if you kill me. The rest of them will be here in a few minutes."

"I thought about that too," he said. "Well. Too bad. It might have worked out so well . . ." his gaunt cheeks worked in muscular display, and his lips tightened. The gun crept higher. My chest was the target now. Another inch . . .

I kept him talking.

"What did you stand to gain by this?" I asked.

"The King Cut," he said. "Surprised? You shouldn't be. You had everything figured so well. How come you didn't have that angle?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You fool! Why did we have to kill your father? Because he heard the Talcott's and myself talking over my plan for raiding the King Cut."

I still didn't know what he was talking about. All I knew was that the barrel of his gun was lifting imperceptibly.

"The strike was the keystone. Two months of it without production. Man, those big boys up east were going crazy. But I fed them the old hooey that it was better this way. Hell! I wanted them to stay out while I rigged up my little deal."

"What little deal?" I asked, and edged forward a bit.

"With the Talcott's," he answered. "A week ago I wired that I was settling the strike. On the basis of my wire, a payroll would have two months of retroactive pay besides a month's regular wages. Eighty thousand dollars coming in from Santa Fe. Man, what a haul that would have been. But it didn't go over, did it?"

"No it didn't," I said, moving forward another few inches.

He laughed and as he laughed the barrel went up again.

"But it did. See that bag there?" he pointed to a black, cow-hide brief case on the desk which stood by one of the two windows. I nodded and he went on. "Eighty thousand dollars are in that. And as soon as I kill you, I'm on my way to Mexico."

"Maybe," I said softly and left my feet in a headlong dive.

There was the sound of an explosion in my ears, and something sharp tugged at my skin along a shoulder blade. But I had my arms around him and he was going over backwards from the shock of my dive, and that was all that mattered. Or so I thought.

I WAS on top of him when we hit the floor. He lay breathless for a second,

and I brought my hands up around his throat. My legs were spread wide. It was so unexpected when he brought both knees up into my groin, that I only felt the shock of the blow. The pain came later. I rolled away from him, and he was on his feet in a single lithe move. I started to mine. I was facing him. I saw his leg go back, tried to brace myself against the kick I knew was coming, but it was too late. His booted foot caught me squarely on the side of the jaw, and though I rolled my head with the kick, I felt the skin peel away from my jaw. The jerking motion of my head threw him a little off balance and he stepped back to take better aim. In that second I got to my hands and knees. I saw his foot coming toward my face again and got one hand in front of it in time. The toe of his boot smacked against my palm and I hung onto it. He pulled back, hopping on one leg as he did so. And I simply lifted his leg high and hard and he went over backward.

I got to my feet shaking my head as I did so. I waited for him to come to his feet. He eyed me warily when he did. Slowly I unstrapped my belt and kicked it out of the way. His lips split in a wolfish grin when he saw what I did. I saw why too late. His hand went behind him in a flashing move and came up with a long-bladed knife. Simultaneously, I dove for the belt on the floor. I had my head turned so that I was looking at him. There wasn't anything I could do about it when his hand went back. I saw the knife coming at me, tried to swing out of the way, but I was so off balance, stooped as I was, I had no chance to do anything except make an involuntary movement of my shoulder. Yet that simple shoulder shrug saved my life. For the heavy-handled blade instead of striking a vulnerable part, hit my shirt under the armpit on the side that was almost on the floor. But because I was already off balance, the blow, slight though it was, knocked me all the way off. The knife point pinned me to the boards.

I twisted around and wrenched viciously at it. It only took an instant. But in that time, Jason was able to get to his gun which had fallen to the floor when I hit him in my dive. He had it trained on me, his finger tight against the trigger. There was no stopping him. I made a last wild effort to get to my feet and his finger squeezed against the trigger.

I watched him fall to the floor.

From the open window to the right a faint wisp of smoke curled inward. I heard the shot, had waited for the impact of the bullet in my body. But nothing had happened. Jason coughed, dropped his gun, folded at the knees and fell flat on his face. A pool of blood spread, like a crimson halo around the body. And a figure stepped over the sill of the window. There was a smoking gun in its right hand. And a grin on its lips. I could only gape my surprise, at him.

" 'S matter, Jed, think I'm a ghost?" my brother asked.

It was a whole picture now. The shot fired through the open window at Martin's place. It had been my brother who had fired. But how . . . ?

My brother explained:

"I was coming up to see you. Oh, don't look so surprised. The news of what you were trying to do up here is all over the southwest. And I hadn't seen the old man for a long time. Jacinto happened to be a stopover. And I saw you ride up that morning.

"I got curious and nosed around. There was talk in Martin's saloon about the old guy who had been killed. I didn't tie it up to . . ." he hesitated and said. "Pa. When Martin walked

to his office I sneaked around the back. I heard the whole thing through the open window. You know the rest. As for how I got here, hell! The whole reason for the Talcott's being here is common talk in Jacinto. So I figured the best place to find the Jason character was . . ." he nodded toward the dead man.

I looked to the brief case on the desk, and smiled.

"Well," I said, "Jason said he wired that the strike was over. "I guess the boys could use some money. Those jukeboxes eat up a lot of nickels."

THE END

THE JINX THAT GALLOPED

IF DICK FELLOWS had been wise, he would have stayed away from horses. But he was a man who could not learn anything through sad experience, and at every turn it was a horse that got him into trouble. Horses threw him, ran away with him and from him, led him into trouble and never out of it. Dick Fellows, robust and tall in build, had his pride to think of; he believed that a bandit as dangerous and notorious as he could not possibly commit a robbery on foot and hold his head up among the ranks of his fellow desperadoes.

Dick Fellows' illustrious name first appears in the annals of the West in connection with a term he served in San Quentin Prison in the year 1870. Little key is given to his past career except in the number of aliases he thought it necessary to assume. Richard Perkins, alias, George Brett Lyle, alias Dick Fellows was convicted on the charge of robbery with assault to murder. The circumstances under which the crime was committed are hidden in unrecorded history and will probably never be known. All the written records show is the fact that Fellows was a native of Kentucky and twenty-four years of age at the time of the conviction.

Dick's prison career was a highly unusual one. Almost as soon as he arrived at San Quentin he was given a job in the library and became known for his long and wordy lectures to his fellow convicts. It was not long before he organized a Sunday-school Bible class among the men. He set such a fine example of prison reformation that he was often pointed out to visitors as a man who had seen the error of his ways. The impression he created was such a good one that in 1874, with less than half his sentence served, Governor Booth granted Dick an unconditional pardon and restored him to citizenship. With an impromptu prayer service, the pardoned convict bade his fellow prisoners farewell, and walked out of San Quentin. The moral effects of his prison experience lasted for some time. For a year and a half, Dick Fellows led an honest life.

On December 6, 1875, a heavy load of gold was due to arrive in Los Angeles by stagecoach. A matter of $240,000 was involved and Wells Fargo wasn't taking any chances. The company's detectives were on the job all along the route. Caliente was the toughest town the stage was to travel through; for years it had been the gathering place for all the trouble-shooters of the West. Detective Hume was not surprised to hear that Dick Fellows had been seen around those parts. Without a moment delay, he issued orders to his men to keep an eye on the psalm-singer from San Quentin.

WHEN December 4th arrived, Hume and several of his aides were at the depot to move the three precious express boxes from the train to the waiting stagecoach. Two officers took seats between the boxes and the other passengers; Detective Hume sat outside with the driver. All three men were well-armed. They were gambling on the fact that no one in Caliente knew about the shipment, but even then, it didn't pay to take chances.

Drawn by the sight of such unusual activity, a crowd gathered. Hume thought he caught sight of Dick Fellows, and it worried him. As the stage hurried out of town, Hume fingered the shotgun which lay across his knees and loaded another which he propped up against the seat. There were more rifles within easy reach if they were needed.

The wary detective's guess about seeing Dick in the crowd was correct. And although the former convict did not know of the gold shipment previously, it didn't take him long to put the three weighty express boxes with Hume and form the right conclusion. A plan was hatched between Dick and a confederate to gain the contents of those very mysterious boxes. Robbing a stage was necessarily a mounted crime, and Dick set out in search of a horse.

The easiest way for him to come into possession of the animal was to rent it from a livery stable and never bother to return it. His reasoning must have been logical enough, for he had no trouble hiring the horse or riding it out of town. But gradually the animal must have come to know that the man on its back did not understand horses. Less than half the distance from their destination the beast rebelled, threw Dick to the ground, and turned back in the direction of Caliente at a brisk gallop. The scheme now folded up; his companion did not dare to attack the stage alone.

Brooding on his bad luck, Dick decided to attempt to hold up the northbound stage due in from Los Angeles around nine o'clock that same

evening. He had no notion what might be in the Wells Fargo box, but assumed there would be something. Again he looked about for a mount and found one hitched in front of the general store.

This time things seemed to be working in his favor. About a mile and a half out of town he surprised the driver of the stage, ordered him to throw out the Wells Fargo box and proceed on his way. The driver complied and the stage vanished down the road in a cloud of dust. But Dick in his hurry had thoughtlessly ignored one very important detail. Once the box was in his hands, he realized he had nothing with which to force it open, and if opened, he had brought along no sack for the booty. There was no time to ponder over this problem, the harassed bandit mounted his horse and tried to balance the clumsy box in front of the saddle somehow. This extra load was more than the stolen steed intended to carry, and as a result Dick was on the ground once more. This time he had some very incriminating evidence in his possession. Discouraged, he set off with the box on his shoulders. In the morning, preoccupied with the thought of his disturbing predicament, Dick increased his burden of troubles by falling eighteen feet into a hole which had been dug by railroad engineers. His left leg was broken above the ankle, and the instep of the same foot was crushed by the falling box. Somehow he managed to crawl pushing the box ahead of him. He buried it, shortly after opening it to find only $1,800 inside, built himself a pair of crutches and hobbled to the nearest ranch.

BY THIS time the wheels of law and order were grinding out more trouble for this unfortunate bandit. When Hume arrived in Los Angeles with the gold shipment intact, he found orders awaiting his arrival with the news of Dick's outrageous deed. He returned to the scene of the crime as quickly as the transportation of those days could get him there. Hume found that he arrived fast on the heels of a second crime. Fountain, a rancher in the vicinity, reported that a horse had been stolen from his stable—a horse whose trail could easily be identified once found. His son informed the detective that only a few days earlier the missing animal had cast a shoe, and his father had tacked on a mule-shoe to protect the hoof until he could take him to the blacksmith. It was not long before the men came across the tell-tale shoe prints.

When they finally caught up with him, Dick's leg was so swollen that the jail doctor had difficulty cutting the boot away. Dick readily admitted stealing the horse, but stoutly denied any connection whatever with the robbery of the Los Angeles stage. The $1,294 in his possession confirmed his guilt in the eyes of Hume, despite his stubbornness to confess. He was indicted for highway robbery and put to bed until his leg could heal. Six months later he was found guilty, made a touching plea for mercy which did not seem to affect the court, and was sentenced to eight years in State's Prison. It appeared that Dick, with his hymns and his horses, had at last come up against a stone wall.

But Dick, not to be outdone by the forces of the law, escaped through a hole he made in the flimsy prison wall, taking with him the fine new pair of crutches which had been supplied by the county. Foiled in the attempt to steal another horse, the law caught up with him in four days and kept him under double guard until the gate of San Quentin shut behind him for the second time.

There were no black marks against him in prison and his term was up in May of 1881. This time he promised the officials that he would "try to live honestly within the pale of society." His efforts in this direction weakened after about two months. Back at robbing stages, he became more bold than he had ever been before. The hold-ups came with alarming frequency in the Santa Clara Valley region—sometimes no more than one week apart. The identity of the robber remained a mystery until Detective Hume took over the case. After some investigation he began to think it might be the work of someone he had met up with before. . . . Dick Fellows, perhaps. The reputation of Wells Fargo and Company was at stake, and Hume was bound to see that it could continue doing business with the confidence of the public.

With Captain Aull as his aide, Hume began to utilize a new technique—that of patient but thorough staff-work. All the towns and villages in the Santa Clara Valley were informed of the type of man the Law was seeking. From now on Dick would not find refuge in any of the communities Aull contacted because the people would be on the look-out for him. Within a week the jaws of this well-laid trap closed on its victim. Dick was cornered on a ranch near Mayfield, and he surrendered to an officer named Burke—a solid citizen, but one without too much foresight.

DICK guessed the man's shortcomings and made full use of them. He employed a lot of flattery and explained to the gaping crowd that saw them on the way to the local jail that no one but Constable Burke could have captured him. The wily crook added that he had the greatest respect for Burke's abilities, and that the man deserved a promotion. By the time they neared the jail, Dick's flattery had given them the excuse for a parting drink together in the nearest saloon. A couple of drinks sufficiently numbed the Constable's senses so that Dick was able to strike him down with his manacled wrists and knock him out. When Burke looked up, his captive had escaped.

The search was resumed once again; the name of Fellows rang on everyone's lips, and the sheriffs of various counties tried to outdo each other in arranging for the earliest possible capture of the slippery highwayman. At last Hume was able to

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NORTHERN RANGE

(Continued from page 33)

way leading into the kitchen. It skidded across the floor and disappeared back of the woodbox. Quong was on him again as Wes broke free, and all of a sudden the Chinese demonstrated what I had known for a long time: he was a man of iron. He handled Wes easily now and we finally got him over on his bunk, blubbering in rage and liquored up frustration, and got some coffee down him. He sobered up a lot and, at dusk, went out and unsaddled his horse and gave the sweat chilled animal a good rub down.

I went up to the house. Lenore was eating a bite of supper alone, reading from a novel.

"One of these days," I said, "you're going to drive Wes too far. He got into a fight with Joe Docker in town this afternoon and got his lip busted."

She held the book up with one hand, using a spoon for a lorgnette, and looked over it in the grand dame manner.

"Fighting, you say? How vulguh! How terribly, terribly crude and vulguh these uncouth cow hands can be when they drink that vile stuff known as liquh. Deah, deah me!"

"Why don't you marry him? We're losing Dad pretty fast to the drinking and Luke's poker games in town, and it might work out at that."

"I think a lot of Wes, Jim," she said, growing serious and putting down book and spoon. "In a lot of ways, Wes and I are two of a kind. We're both hot headed and have more of a mule streak in us than Susie. But I'm not ready to get married yet. Not for a year or two at least. I want to have a *little* fun before I have to stay at home and go around carrying a baby inside me about nine months out of the year."

"Well, anyhow," I said, "I wish you'd lay off Wes. He's spending too much time up here when he'd ought to be out working in the timber with the other boys. Dad's going to find out one of these days and you know what'll happen. He'll fire Wes, no matter how much he likes him. Then you'd have your fellow gone."

She flashed me a kittenish smile. "I can get another, Jimmy, my little six foot brother. I can get any man I want."

"Any except Slim," I jeered at her. "He won't even look at you. He likes Ruth a lot better and I got a hunch he'll marry her one of these days."

"Maybe," she said. "Just maybe she will. And maybe not. But let's not talk about marriage. Not about me getting married, anyhow. I'm going to wait a couple of years and Wes can like it or he can go marry some other girl—somebody like Ruth."

We lost the horse from pneumonia and that kind of quieted Wes down for a little while. He dug back in on the work and was all the better for it. He stayed away from her for two or three days, but it seemed as though those two just naturally were built for quarrelling and loving. I'd go up to the house and find them sitting on the bench at the kitchen table, Lenore in his tight arms and kissing him passionately. Ten minutes later she'd be demanding back the tintype he had stolen and which Wes claimed to have lost. Nor would he have returned it anyhow.

But things couldn't go on much longer without coming to a head. She continued to goad him into fits of jeal-

ousy, and one night she went just a little bit too far.

Because of her, Wesley Allen shot Joe Docker dead at the school house dance in town.

CHAPTER VIII

WE HAD all pitched in at the ranch and got the work done early that Saturday afternoon — all except Wes and Dad. Wes had had another kid tiff with Lenore and come on into town about mid-afternoon while we finished feeding the stock. Winter had been hit by the first faint touch of spring and the cattle didn't need so much feed now. Foraging helped us a lot. Dad already was in town, playing cards at Luke's domino parlor. He hadn't been home in a couple of days.

So that afternoon all of us and Lenore saddled up and headed for Montrose an hour or more before sunset. The white land still lay frozen but the weather was clear and there was promise of an early moon that night. Lenore rode in the midst of us in split leather riding skirt, her dance dress carefully packed back of her saddle. She would change clothes and shoes over at Ruth's house.

Quong jogged along in the midst of us, obviously just a little proud of his new warm wooly chaps. One thing you had to say for him: he now sat a horse like a man born to the saddle. He had the old lariat I'd sold him in coils on the fork and had gotten to where he could do a pretty fair job of looping a yearling on the run. A few times he had built his loops too big and got them caught under the tail of his mount —something the cow ponies just didn't like at all. When it happened Quong let go of everything and unashamedly grabbed the horn and hung on.

He hadn't been spilled, either.

I'd been waiting impatiently for him to go in and clean out Luke, who, with Joe, had branched out the month before. They'd rented a modest building and opened up a general store, hiring a man to run the business. But Quong apparently had forgotten Luke and, of late, only recently sat in the bunk house games.

We clattered up the street in a group and rode over to Hal Rogers' livery to put the horses inside out of the cold until time to start the after midnight, freezing ride back to the ranch. Slim helped Lenore down and took the reins of her horse.

"You dog-goned sure better save me a couple of dances tonight, m' pretty one, or I'll just naturally tear up the place and throw the pieces about," he said in his soft voice.

She dimpled prettily, a stock trait of hers, and gave him a slow wink. "I'll strike a bargain with you you handsome devil," she smiled, a caressing hand on his mackinawed arm. "You bring Wes to the dance good and sober and I'll give you *three* dances—provided you don't go after Ruth too much and neglect me."

"Ruth?" Slim Holcomb said, trying to act surprised at the remark. "Why, she's only a kid—not any older than Jim here."

"Cut it out and let's go have a couple of snorts," I put in testily. "I'm cold and I need a few to set me up for the dance."

Kid, was I! Sixteen years old, six feet tall, one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Kid, was I!

"Oh, yes?" Lenore inquired archly of Slim. "Hoity-toity, cowboy! If she's only a kid, how come you're always after her for dances all the time?"

AS A MATTER of fact, Slim *was* after Ruth. She was a lovely girl

whose blonde hair now looked a lot different than it had in pigtails when she, Lenore, and I had gone to school together. But she was quite tall now, more so than Lenore, and she and Slim made a beautiful couple on a dance floor. Some of us figured that Slim and Ruth would be getting married one day. There had been some talk of it among the women in town. I remember that Wes had hoo-rawed his friend about it quite a lot, probing for information, but Slim wouldn't commit himself. Ruth had indignantly denied it, blushing scarlet at Wes' knowing laughter.

"Cut it out, dammit, Lenore," I told her impatiently. "Save it for the dance to use on the others. Come on, Quong, let's get these horses inside."

About that time Ruth came in from the livery barn, where she'd been showing Johnny Barker junior, the minister's son, how to care for some more horses. She and her mother, Mildred, were having to run the place now, Hal not able to leave his bed. Ruth greeted us all and Lenore, the dress under her arm, went inside with her. We put up the horses and headed down the street for Andy's place to cut the cold, our boots slipping on the icy snow on the boardwalks. Andy bellied up and told us that the first one was on the house because he'd just bought it and was now the new owner.

"You coming over to the school house to call for us tonight?" Slim asked, setting down his glass and reaching for his pocket to pay for the second round.

"I'll be there bellering like a bull in a cow shed," Andy grinned. "I'm just getting Cub here, my new night bartender, lined out. I'm going to take the day part of it because a man with a wife and four kids oughta be home with 'em at night."

"He sure ought to," snickered Slim. "Any man is as big a fool as to get married a-tall sure ought to stay home nights. Serves the jackass right for getting himself all hitched up in the first place."

We had a good laugh and Andy joined in. He was the best caller of square dances in the county. I asked about Wes.

"He's been in," Andy Calders nodded. "Pretty well loaded up but not enough he can't have a good time at the dance tonight."

We had a third round, though Quong wouldn't drink liquor. He was still a bit of a curiosity around town, but people didn't think too much of it inasmuch as he was working for Dad. Everybody knew Ed Devers was going to pieces fast, drinking and gambling and brooding over his dead wife of nearly five years back, but he was still very much respected. That meant, specifically, no remarks about him, his ranch, his kids, or any of his men.

There was a barber shop next door and we piled in to get haircuts and our boots shined and a good smell put on for the dance. By the time we finished and ate steak and eggs in a restaurant it was still an hour before time for the dance to start. I headed for Luke and Joe's domino parlor to find Dad.

The place where Luke and Joe had put up their domino parlor wasn't a very imposing structure; just a lean-to built against the side of John Barker's coal and lumber yard building. The room was narrow and ran all the way back to a short bar where a decrepit flunkey sold soda pop to the thirsty, collected a dime a game for checkers and dominos, and brought new decks over to the players. It was pretty well filled, being Saturday night; but interest was chiefly fixed on the green topped poker table in the back, close to the stove.

Dad was in the game, sitting with his

back to me as I threaded my way among the checker and domino players and came up beside him. His hat was off and his hair looked shaggy and uncut. His whiskers, grey shot, showed that he hadn't bothered about shaving during the past four or five days. He seemed to be losing weight, his wrinkled neck appearing to be all Adam's Apple. Lenore and I, as kids, had used to giggle about his prominent Adam's Apple, calling it a "whiskey gargle." We believed that you could tell just how much liquor a man drank by the size of his "whiskey gargle."

LUKE looked up. He was dressed like a businessman now and the blonde mustache was quite long and beginning to droop at the ends. It made him look far older than his twenty-three or twenty-four years. He said, "Hello, Jim. Hi, Chinkie. How's things coming?"

Dad turned his head aside for a moment from the cards held close against his chest, nodding a, "Howdy, son."

"How's luck?" I asked.

"Could be better."

He put out the last of his small pile of chips. Ike McCauley dropped out but Joe Hodge stayed. Luke raised and Dad looked up at me again. He had four nines. "How much money have you got on you, Jim?" he asked.

"About eighty dollars," I said and reached for my hip pocket.

I gave him two twenties, three tens, a five, and five more silver dollars. He called Luke's raise with the cash and the cards were down. Luke Osborn held a *royal flush!*

"Well, by God!" he gasped out excitedly. "I've been playing poker since I was a pup and that's the hand I've been dreaming about for years. Charley! Hey, Charley! Bring us a new deck. I don't want to use this one anymore. Get some tacks and a hammer, Charley, and tack this hand up on the wall right back of this chair. Nobody will ever believe it unless I show 'em!"

Dad's shoulders seemed to droop a little. "Well, Luke," he said in a tired voice. "I guess that about finishes me for tonight. Bank doesn't open until Monday. Reckon I'll be getting along over to the dance and see some of the boys."

"I used to work for you, Ed," Luke Osborn said in a kindly voice. "Your word was as good as your bond and so were your checks. You're a damned good friend of mine and that means your IOU is good here anytime. Any man is bound to have a run of bad luck. Yours ought to be just about good for a change."

He shoved pencil and pad across the green topped table . . . and I got sick as Dad reached for it. "I'll play a few more hands before we go over to the dance," Dad said. "Give me five hundred in chips, Luke. Yellows and blues. No whites."

I looked at Quong, hoping he'd want to get in the game. But the Chinese rider shook his head. Inscrutable Orientals, they say. There was pity in his eyes as we went out.

"I ought to go borrow Wes' six shooter and kill that sonuvabitch," I said bitterly.

"Don't," Quong said. "It wouldn't help things a bit, pardner," the word pardner coming softly and a little shyly. "Your father wouldn't stop anyhow."

No, I thought, he probably wouldn't. His iron will and self control, once so dominant a part of his character, had pretty well deteriorated. I'd tried to tell him once or twice before that Luke was a tinhorn; a crooked one. But for some strange reason I couldn't fathom, Dad like Luke Osborn immensely. He

actually believed in the man. Of course, if he ever found out about Luke cheating—if he ever was given any actual proof—he'd kill Luke and go to the penitentiary. So he could do that or go on losing.

IT DIDN'T seem to make much difference. And in that moment I fully realized for the first time that the Devers ranch wasn't Dad anymore. It was I, Jim Devers, sixteen and seeing our family beginning its breakup.

I took Quong back over to Andy's and got another drink. I needed it. Mother . . . gone with pneumonia, leaving the three of us. Lenore, narrow, sexy, and heading God knew where. Dad, drinking himself to death and bucking a stacked deck in Luke Osborn's domino parlor.

I felt closer to Quong than to anybody then. I had begun to lean on him for companionship . . . and, where Luke was concerned, protection.

Joe Docker came in. He smelled as though he'd also just come from the barber shop. He wore a new cream colored Stetson, creased rakishly through the crown, with a brim much narrower than the ten gallon type so many of the cow hands affected. That hat and his new dark blue suit established him as a cow hand no longer but a budding and prosperous business man. His greeting about matched that of Luke's in tone and words, "Hello, Jim. Howdy, Chinkie." And I noticed that, though he might be playing the part of the business man, there was the bulge of a six shooter under his coat.

Cow country courtesy demanded that I offer him a drink and he took it.

"Going to the dance?" I asked, anything to make conversation until we could take polite leave.

His eyes lit up. "Dance? You're darned tootin' I'm going to that shindig. You wouldn't think, now would you, that an old bald-headed, busted down cow hand like me could cut the buck, hey? You just wait and see. And tell that pretty sister of yourn that she's got to dance with me. After all, I used to punch for your dad. He's a great friend of me and Luke—spends a lot of time with us over at the domino parlor. And me and Luke are big businessmen now too, Jim. D'they tell you about our new store? It's doing plenty of business, so drop in anytime. Your credit's good for all you want."

I took his courtesy drink in return, mostly to cut the bad taste out of my mouth at his mention of dancing with Lenore. He went out and almost immediately afterward Wes Allen came in, through the back door. He'd been to the saloon's outhouse, in the alley. He saw us and came over, weaving.

"You're a hell of a looking sight," I said, feeling a little high myself by now.

"I need another drink," he said.

"You've had about enough, haven't you, Wes? Lenore is over at Ruth's house getting dressed for the dance and she's a little on the prod about you coming in early this afternoon and not waiting for her. Come on over and let's get some black coffee. Say—have you had any supper?"

CHAPTER IX

HE HADN'T and didn't want any. We fought him across the street and into a restaurant. Quong had hold of his other arm and Wes' curses at the Chinese rider left Quong, as usual, unperturbed. If he had called me what he had called Quong I'd have taken the six shooter from the sheath that Wes now wore at his right hip and slammed him over the head with the butt. I was getting pretty disgusted with Wes. I

was about fed up.

We got about four cups of old Ching's coffee down him. It sobered him up a little, but he still refused to eat. He tried to roll a cigarette and his fingers shook. Liquor and black coffee had played hell with his nerves. Quong rolled the cigarette for him, let Wes lick it, held the match, and we set off for the dance where Joe Docker was to meet his death that night . . . where Wes Allen was to kill his first man.

We had to stop with Wes a couple of times on the way over to the school house, the liquor and coffee tearing up his kidneys. The school building was situated just off the main street of Montrose, behind Andy's place and about four hundred yards down; a large edifice of which the townsmen were quite proud. It was the only building of grey stone blocks in town, letting the world know that Montrose was up and coming. Nothing too good for Montrose's children in the way of educational progress. Two white columns supported a concrete porch that covered double doors leading in to the main auditorium. Here all the seats had been removed from the smooth floor and arranged around the four walls. Chairs had been placed upon the stage for five musician brothers who were playing for us that night for the first time.

Quong, Wes and I went in. Pot bellied stoves, one at each side of the auditorium, glowing red from John Barker's coal, had each its little crowd of early comers huddled around, talking and killing time. We moseyed over and Wes took off his gun helt, hanging the lead weighted leather loops back of a chair against the wall. He stood warming his hands before the stove and not saying anything. More people filed in, chattering and removing heavy wraps. In a matter of minutes the new musicians pushed through the big doorway, instruments under their arms. They came over to the fire, slapping mittened hands and shivering after the walk from town. Presently they removed heavy coats and moved toward the chairs set up on the stage and started tuning up. One played the school house piano.

Just before the first dance got under way Lenore put in appearance.

I was standing with my back to the stove, hands behind me to its welcome warmth, when, through the big glass front that somebody among the supervisors had thought would be appropriate to a new school house, Lenore, Ruth, and Slim Holcomb appeared on the porch.

They stopped for a moment while I saw Lenore's eyes take in the interior. She saw me . . . and she saw Wes Allen standing beside me.

That was all my sister Lenore needed. She reached out and hooked her arm in Slim's surprised one and—damn her vain little heart!—made the entrance of a queen.

Gone now were the split riding skirt, high heeled boots, red mackinaw, and woolen cap. She wore patent leather high heeled button shoes and a sheeny blue dress draping almost, but not quite, to the ankles. The dress was pulled in tight at her slim waist, throwing her hard round breasts out invitingly. Her brown hair was coiled high on her head, and I could have sworn that the lights reflected from her green eyes. They made a picturesque pair, she and Slim; and poor Ruth Rogers, pretty though she was, trailed behind them almost unseen.

Lenore was the cynosure of all eyes.

HER CHIN was up, almost too far back, and she was smiling a white toothed smile that made me want to go over and blot it out with a slap in the

mouth. Her cat eyes caught Wes' smouldering ones, passed them by, and swept the hall. She waved a greeting to friends and then, deliberately, steered Slim across to the other stove, away from where Wes stood glowering beside me.

Quong said, softly, "She hasn't changed. The hair and shape of the eyes, yes. But their color and her face are the same, just as of old. I knew it was her from the first moment."

"Huh?" I asked, a little startled. He'd been speaking so low, to himself, that I perhaps hadn't heard all of it.

"Huh? What did you say, old timer?" I asked him.

"Why . . . nothing, Jim," he murmured, not looking at me. "Just thinking out loud, perhaps."

He turned away, almost embarrassed, and Lenore's clear laugh floated from over at the other stove, where she still held onto Slim's now silk shirted arm. Beside me Wes' teeth gave off an audible grinding sound; or maybe it was a half grunt. He reversed position and faced the stove, his back to her, staring down at the ash box. He spat hard into it. A dry spittle. He didn't say anything and I thought: he ought to have another drink or some more coffee.

The dance began. The first number, to start things off.

The five new musicians had struck up a slow, soft, swaying waltz and Lenore, ignoring the fact that she had always danced the first number with Wes, held out her arms to Slim. I saw him hesitate momentarily. He knew too; and he knew that his first dance belonged to Ruth Rogers. But her arms were out and Slim took her. They floated off across the polished floor with Lenore holding him a little too tightly, her cheek snuggled up close to his, leaving Ruth standing alone by the stove.

I wanted to go over and ask Ruth to dance with me, but I was at that age where I had to stand around for about an hour before getting up courage to start asking pardners.

"Go over and dance with Ruth, why don't you, Wes?" I suggested, thinking that perhaps if he played up to her enough Lenore would turn jealous for a change.

"The hell with her," he scowled. "I don't want to dance tonight. All I need is another drink or two."

"Well," I said with all the sagaciousness of a sixteen year old, "if that's the way love is supposed to make a man happy, then I sure as the devil am glad that I don't like the wimmin."

More people were coming in all the time, word about the new musicians having been spread around by Andy Calders. We usually just had a fiddle and a guitar, with an occasional woman chording on the piano. The hall began to fill and more couples went onto the floor. By the time the couples formed for the first square dance and Andy bawled a full lunged, *Circle four in the middle of the floor!* Dad entered the front door.

He was flanked by Luke Osborn and Joe Docker and Luke had a familiar hand on Dad's shoulder as they paused just inside to wait until the square was finished. Luke was letting people know that, as a prospective big business man in Montrose, he was a close friend of Ed Devers.

Dad was freshly shaved now, but the effects of heavy drinking were still in his face and eyes. He still looked old and haggard. I wondered how much he had lost to Luke that night—not knowing until later that it was close to fifteen hundred dollars.

Wes appeared to have forgotten his fight with Joe. He just glanced at him and then let his glowing eyes go back to Lenore, still dancing with Slim. The

square finally ended with shrill whistles from a half dozen panting men letting the musicians know they had had enough. The couples broke and merged, started walking off the floor.

Then I saw Wes Allen.

He was threading his way among the crowd toward Lenore.

I EASED over, not so much to listen to them quarrel, but figuring that if I could get near Ruth and maybe let her know I was standing there I could get up enough courage to ask for that first dance. Once over that hurdle, I'd be all set for the rest of the evening.

Wes moved in on Lenore and Slim and maybe Slim saw trouble coming between his pardner and Lenore, for he turned and got Ruth for the next dance. Then Wes was close to my sister . . ., and so was Joe Docker in his new blue suit, the lights shining on his flat topped bald head.

Wes mumbled something to her and I turned. She was standing with a hand on Joe's arm, her green eyes looking at Wes mockingly.

"Why . . . I'm *so* sorry, Mister Allen, but I've got this next dance with Joe, haven't I, Joe?"

"You sure have," Joe said, surprised but quite happy.

"After all, *Mister* Allen, Joe used to work for us and I'm sure that if I gave him a date to take me to the dance he wouldn't come in town ahead of time and get drunk and leave me to ride in with my brother, now would you, Joe?"

Joe grinned an asinine grin and took her into his arms, pulling her in close to his heavy belly, and looked over her shoulder at Wes.

"I sure wouldn't, honey chile," he said in her ear; and to Wes: "Out of the way, cow hand. Lenore and me's got business together. I'm a business man now, ha, ha!"

She danced three straight dances with Joe. He turned out to be a surprisingly good man on the floor for his build and age. Out at the ranch he had, at times, displayed a surly disposition. But there wasn't anything surly about him now. He was drunk on new found prosperity—and it was plain that he was pretty flattered that a girl just turned eighteen, twice as young as he, was showering attentions on him. It was going to his head a little.

He was a cheap tinhorn who, out at the ranch earlier in the winter, had with Luke cleaned the boys of their summer wages. He and Luke certainly were doing all right since they'd moved into town. And I think, during those three dances, that Joe Docker was getting the idea under his bald head that maybe he was a pretty big man in town now and that a lot of other pretty girls of eighteen had married men of his age.

Maybe I was wrong, but I think that was what was in Joe's mind that night. I do know that she had her left arm snug around his neck, her cheek up against his smooth shaven florid face, and that they kept pretty much to the middle of the floor a good deal of the time. When they worked over toward the edge of the crowd it apparently never occurred to Joe that she was cleverly steering him over past the stove where Wes Allen stood glowering. Nor did it occur to him that when she did her eyes were looking, quite mockingly, into Wes' over Joe's thick shoulder. Joe wasn't aware of anything except that he was being showered with attention by the prettiest girl at the dance . . . and that he loved it. Pretty indeed, she was.

God, how lovely was she that night, my green-eyed sister!

I was dancing with Ruth now, and

she seemed to read my thoughts. "Gee, Jim, isn't Leonore pretty?" she finally exclaimed. "I'd give anything if I was just half as beautiful as she is."

"Well . . . I'm glad you ain't!" I said snappishly.

"Why?"

"Because she's a damned trouble making hellcat," I growled.

SURPRISE shocked her speechless for a moment, she pushing back and holding me at arms' length. Ruth went to church every Sunday and, so they said, prayed hard for the sick father that she worshipped. She was deeply religious, and one girl in town whose name was in the clear from gossip mongers.

"Why, Jim Devers!" she gasped out, finally. "Why, I never—Jim Devers, if you *ever* say anything like that about Lenore again I'll never speak to you as long as I live! She's not . . . what you just said. You just don't understand a girl like her, that's all. She's really good and sweet. Why—"

"Well, it's true," I broke in sullenly —the same kind of sullenness Wes took on during his quarrels with Lenore. I didn't like being rebuked. After all, she was only a girl of sixteen and I was practically running my father's ranch now. "It's true," I repeated. "She's sore at Wes and she's devilling him. She's picked out the ugliest damn gent in the place and is making up to him when ordinarily she wouldn't bother to waste spit. She knows that Joe is a crooked tinhorn card sharp, working the cards with Luke and always pretending to lose to him when they're in the same game. She knows Wes started to kill Joe once before and still hates him. But does that make any difference? Not at all! All she knows is that she's mad at Wes and has a chance to get even by hugging up the ugliest man here in this school house. There's going to be trouble before this dance is over and I've got to try and stop it."

She was still holding me at arms' length. "*You're* going to stop it, are you? Oh, my, now aren't you the big grown up man though! Poo on you, Jim Devers!"

I thought I'd better change the conversation, and asked about Hal. He was, she said, no better. I told her how sorry I was, and meant it. Hal and Mildred had been pretty old and loyal friends for many years; and I could still remember Mildred coming in and out of that dreaded north sick room the night, five years before, when she said that Mom had gone away. I was only eleven then but there lingered long in my memory the warm motherliness of her as she took me in her arms that night and held me close while I cried. Ruth had been with her and Ruth had cried too.

So I was pretty sorry about poor Hal Rogers being home in bed sick, spitting up more blood all the time. Dad had been going over to see him pretty regularly, and I had intended to except that the affairs of the ranch were taking up more and more of my time.

The music stopped and I let Ruth go over near where Lenore and Joe Docker were walking off the floor. Joe's short arm was still around her waist, where it had been for quite some time. Dad saw it too and his face darkened. I went over to him.

"You're a pretty good dancer for a boy so tall, son," he said, not unkindly.

"I had a good pardner," I said. And: "Dad, there's going to be trouble here. We ought to get Lenore out of here without anybody noticing. Did you see how she's making up to Joe? She's doing it to spite Wes. She's sore at him for coming in town a little ahead of us

and not waiting to ride in with her. Dammit, Dad, if she don't quit devilling Wes there's going to be a ruckus here tonight."

"I know," he nodded. "I don't know where she gets that ornery streak. Maybe from me. Certainly not from her mother."

"Oh, oh! Here comes Wes now. My God, Dad!—*he's got his gun strapped on on a dance floor!*"

I gasped out the last words, something in Wes' face hitting my stomach and causing it to constrict. I felt everything get all tightened up inside of me.

It had come.

CHAPTER X

WES WAS moving across the dance floor, the gun sheath looking strangely out of place against his thigh. You didn't pack a gun inside a place where people were dancing. It was as much of a breach of cow country etiquette as I'd made in going in for the second helping of peach cobbler. He looked out of place, even though a lot of people hadn't noticed. Andy Calders, over with his wife and four young kids, would have been after Wes in a minute had *he* noticed.

But he didn't; and I watched in a strange kind of fascination as Wes, six shooter heavy at his hip, approached Joe. He didn't lose any time. He called Joe a cheap tinhorn, card cheating bastard and swung without warning at Joe's moon face. The blow landed hard and rolled Joe's head back on his thick neck. Wes swung again, overpowering rage causing making him miss, and then they were slugging it out on the edge of the school house auditorium dance floor, while women squealed and a couple of men pushed in to hustle them out and let them finish it outside on the hard packed snow.

About that time I saw Luke Osborn. He had been standing close by, and by the time Wes' first blow had landed Luke was moving in, tall, well dressed, his blonde mustache gleaming. He reached the two struggling men, ahead of the others, his right hand coming out from under his coat with a six shooter. He was going to slam Wes over the head with it.

Kid, was I? As tall as Luke and weighing equally as much.

I went for him.

Where Quong came from I don't truly know. I caught a flash of oily black hair, black silk shirt, new woolen pants, shiny calfskin boots so small they might have been Lenore's, hurtling past. A head shorter than Luke, he hit his middle in a plunge that carried Luke down, and I went down on top of them, swinging hard at Luke's face.

It somehow reminded me of our overpowering Wes Allen out at the bunkhouse, though around us was confusion; shouted orders that nobody obeyed, laughter that had something to do with old Ed's kid being bigger than a horse and, instead of riding one, ought to be saddled up himself. But nothing from Dad. I'd got myself into it and I could fight my way out on my own.

Luke still had the gun, though I was fighting for his arm. I got it, broke the weapon from his fingers, and skidded it across the powdered dance floor. Ironically it headed straight for one of the stoves and ended up against the coal box back of it. I heard men begin to scuffle toward the door and a woman screamed again. Some man was trying to haul me up off Luke, who was down on his back and cursing, but I was remembering the boys' wages and how Luke also was bleeding Dad dry, a few hundred at a time. I shook off the man's grasping hand while the other men funnelled toward the front door in

a struggling mass to see the finish of the fight outside. I slammed away at both of Luke's eyes, got a couple at his thin, ridged nose, and tore half the skin off my right knuckles on his teeth when the shot came, followed by a second.

We jumped up off of Luke and ran outside. Men were milling and you could feel that somehow death had come in amongst us; it was everywhere in the air, the sound, in the night itself; and I heard a woman scream: high pitched, sudden terror keening it to the cry of a panther. "He's killed him! He's killed him! Oh, my heavens—he's killed him!"

I pushed through the crowd, followed by Quong.

THERE was a twenty foot ring of shivering men and women around Joe. He was down on the dirty snow that had been packed into slick ice, lying a few feet from one of the columns supporting the porch roof. He lay partly on his right side, a gun by his hand, the full white new moon shining eerily on his bald head with the fringe of freshly barbered hair around the edges. Red was running from his nose and mouth, red that was black in the moonlight, and the front of his new suit was getting soggily black too.

Wes had shot him twice through the lungs.

Wesley Allen stood off to one side about ten feet, alone, pale, and shaken, his old gun still clenched in tight fingers. He looked a lot different from the easy going, laughing Wes of a few months back. He looked different from the drunk, surly Wes of an hour or two before. He just gazed down at Joe as though he didn't fully realize as yet what had actually happened, though the gun, the milling crowd, and Joe's horribly sprawled body, lax in death, was gradually hammering into his maddened brain that he had just killed his first man. I could see that dazed look on his face, turning slowly into one of fear as sanity came back; fear at what he had done. He looked scared.

Something, I don't know what, caused me to glance at Lenore. Dad was beside her, holding her arm in a grip that must have left marks from his strong fingers. He knew she was responsible, she alone. He was with her for support and, right or wrong, she was still his kid.

She was staring down at Joe and then looking at Wes, and then letting her wide eyes go back to that lifeless hulk of flesh as though it held for her some queer fascination. The red from Joe's nose and mouth had worked under the side of his laxly florid face and was trickling off on the slope of the ice behind his hairless head; coagulating as it ran.

While I looked at her a change came into her own face, far different from what I had seen in Wes' now scared countenance. Her chin went up a little. And the moon was bright enough that I could see that defensive, petulant look I knew so well appear, brought on by the droop of the corners of her red lips. She knew people were looking at her and why. They knew, most of them, about her and Wes. Everybody had expected them to run away and get married at any time. She knew . . . and her nose itself seemed to lift, the nostrils flaring.

But she was too good an actress to hold it for long. The petulant look faded in the change in her lips and her eyes dropped, turning to Slim standing protectingly at her other side.

"Slim," she whimpered to Slim Holcomb, for the benefit of the crowd, almost burying her face against his rigid arm. "Slim, take me inside. I feel aw-

fully sick. Oh, this is terrible!"

Andy Calders moved past me, cautiously to hold his footing on the ice. He moved unhurriedly and easily but with grim purpose. A pistol gleamed from a hip pocket holster at the right of his broad hips.

"Lemme have the gun, Wes," he said, not unkindly, reaching for it. "This is bad business, son. Let's go over to the bar and have a drink, Wes, and then I'm afraid I'll have to drive you over to Hoogan to see Ed Brady. Come on. Give me the gun, son."

Wes let him have the gun, the death weapon sliding from his limp fingers into Andy's palm. Andy sent a man in after their coats and caps and to tell his wife where he was going. They went out to the rig that he had used to bring his wife and four kids to the dance.

Luke Osborn came out, pushing through the crowd, a white handkerchief spotted red working at his nose. His hair was rumpled and blood from a cut over his eye stained his mustache. I felt pretty satisfied about the mess I'd made of his face.

"One of you boys go find a buggy," he said to nobody in particular. "We've got to get poor Joe over to town. Damn, but this is awful."

And I was still filled with just enough fight to think, maybe you think it's awful and maybe you getting Joe's half of the store and domino parlor ain't so awful after all.

I NODDED to Quong and went back inside. All the women were huddled around the stoves, talking in subdued tones and casting glances at Lenore with Slim and Dad. The musicians, instruments on their chairs up on the stage, were with them; uncertain and waiting. I went over to Lenore, sitting with handkerchief daintily to her nose, Ruth with an arm around her for comfort. Slim hovered solicitiously beside her. So did Dad, his face a little challenging when he caught peoples' eyes gazing in fascination at Lenore.

"Well," I said with brotherly callousness to my sister, "I hope you're finally satisfied. It's too bad you ain't got a gun of your own, so's you could file a notch on the barrel like some of the bad gents do. You sure as the devil killed your first man tonight."

She had been feeling pretty sorry for herself, what with Ruth Rogers' protecting arm around her shoulders and low words of comfort, with Slim and Dad standing by. She had been about ready to cry with self pity. My remark changed all that. The lips went petulant and her green eyes flashed, cat-like as she fought back.

"You can't talk to me like that!" she flared angrily, forgetting the handkerchief. "I won't stand for it. It wasn't my fault. We wouldn't have killed him anyhow. Wes is bad—he's just no good. He always had a bad streak in him. You shut your mouth, Jim!"

"Please, Jim," Ruth pleaded softly. "I can't believe it was really her fault, or even Wes'. He'd been drinking, that's all."

"I'm not sorry for Joe," I said gruffly. "I just hate to see Wes go to the pen over a shooting that might not have happened if she'd have kept her place and not led him on in front of Wes."

"Shut up, Jim," Dad cut in curtly. "You're getting a little too big for your boots. You keep your mouth shut. Go get Wes' horse and take him on back to the ranch. Not another word do I want to hear out of you tonight."

I faced him, this father whom I'd always so feared, still hot inside; and it came to me with something of a start at that particular moment that I was no

longer afraid of him. Maybe the fight with Luke had had something to do with it. Maybe it was because I had lost respect for him on account of the drinking and gambling and loafing in town. I don't know what it was. I only knew with some kind of a strange feeling deep inside of me that night that the Devers family was a family no more and that never again would I feel the slash of Dad's quirt across my hips and back.

He was still my father but not any longer an object of filial fear. I was from then on my own boss.

I met his cold, hard gaze and moved in closer, not wanting anybody else to hear what I had to say. It might mean the break. It might mean that Quong and me would be pulling stakes in the morning. I faced him and again the surprised thought struck me that I could return stare for cold stare.

"Maybe she ain't too much to blame at that," I got out, holding my voice low and level. "Maybe it's partly your fault. You knew these last months that she was battling with Wes while he loafed around the kitchen. You knew she was turning just a little meaner and selfish than she used to be when we were kids. But you were too busy guzzling liquor and losing our profits to that crooked tinhorn whose face I messed up to bother about anything. If you'd a spent less time at that and more time keeping a check rein on her, this wouldn't have happened. Come on, Quong. Let's go get Wes' horse."

I wanted as we went out to look back. I wanted to see what was in his face. I had the feeling that he was staring at me, maybe a little puzzled, maybe a little uncertain and even surprised. That's what I imagined, at least. We went into the night with our mackinaws on. The crowd was still around, though three men had hold of Joe Docker's limp body by the boots and arms and were carrying it toward a light wagon. Night cold bit us and the moon looked frozen and on the ice we carefully skirted the dark red blotch with its twin tentacles leading away. Voices sounded louder than usual and from the direction of town came the clop-clop of Andy's rig taking Wes over to the bar; hollow, almost mocking sounds that seemed to toll the end of what had been on the Devers ranch.

It would be different at breakfast in the morning. Wes would be missing at the table.

Quong and I walked back up town and got our horses and mounted. Wes' wasn't in the barn. So we made the rounds up and down the street and finally found the half frozen brute tied hard in front of Billie's place, among the trees at the south side of town, across the tracks. The old frame house was lit up and sounds of music and laughter told that the boys were having drinks in the parlor while an itinerant fiddler, known only as "Hoe-Down," scraped away for the few drinks they bought him and the meals that Billie fed him.

We led the animal back to the ranch and I sat up awhile in the bunkhouse, half hoping that Dad would come on home. He didn't and neither did Lenore.

She had run away with Slim Holcomb and got married over at Hoogan where Wes Allen was in his cell for the shooting of Joe Docker.

CHAPTER XI

DAD PUT up twenty-five hundred dollars in bail for Wes the next morning and got him out of jail. I wasn't there but they said that Dad was so drunk he was thick-tongued when he went to the Hoogan bank and

put a mortgage on some of our cattle to make up what his bank account lacked. I guessed he was taking it pretty hard over Lenore running away with Slim. It wasn't that he didn't like Slim. They didn't come any better, either as a man or as a ranch hand. I think it was because since Mom's passing Lenore had kind of taken Mom's place in the house and, even when they came back, things just wouldn't be the same. She wouldn't any longer be the pet kid who bullied him and looked after his clothes. She would have somebody else to share affection. And I think he had wanted Lenore right at home with him; always.

I frankly was pretty glad about her marrying Slim. She and Wes were too much of a kind—too hot headed and jealous—ever to have hit it off. Slim would take a lot off her, and by letting his easy going nature absorb some of the selfishness of her things might just work out a lot better than if she had finally given in and married Wesley Allen.

So I wasn't worried about her running away. What did worry me was the fact that Dad had had to mortgage some of the ranch stuff to make up a thousand of the bail money. That told me how heavy his losses to Luke Osborn had been. We'd got a pretty good buyer price for the two hundred head of prime beef stuff the previous fall, and even after settling up at the local stores and paying off summer wages, there had been quite a lot more than fifteen hundred left in the bank at Hoogan.

It looked as though Luke was really bleeding him.

So, with my recent quarrel still afresh in mind, maybe I didn't feel too sorry for Dad about "losing" Lenore. Not the way he was drinking and gambling away what we earned the hard way out at the ranch.

It looked as though I wasn't working for Dad and the Devers spread any longer. I was working for Luke Osborn. He was taking in, night after night over his card table, the profits that could have accrued from our long daily hours out at the ranch.

Wes didn't, to my surprise, come back to the ranch after Dad bailed him out of jail. He might have figured that he was a cinch to go to the pen for a few years over the shooting and better have a final fling; but I got the idea that, Lenore being his girl, he didn't relish facing the boys after she had run away on the night of the shooting. So he hung around town, living in a hotel room next to the one Dad now rented by the week. Dad seldom bothered to ride out to the ranch anymore; maybe once or twice a week to change clothes. I knew Wes didn't have any money saved up—he'd lost it all playing poker with Luke and Joe and in drinking down at Billie's. I figured that Dad was supporting him until he went on trial in the spring, when District Court convened. I found out differently through friends, however.

Wes was gambling at Luke's domino parlor and *winning!*

I couldn't figure this one out, not after the way Luke had taken him the previous fall, and broached the subject to Quong.

QUONG grinned—he grinned now instead of smiling like a Chinese smiles—and shrugged his shoulders. "It's very easy to answer, Jim. Luke Osborn got Joe's half of the domino parlor and that very busy store after Joe was killed. That store is pretty big now. Luke is in the money. He wants to become a big businessman in Montrose. But Wes is there and Wes is still dangerous. He might go on the

rampage"—his westernized expressions again!—"and do the same to Luke. So Luke Osborn is merely supporting Wes, on your father's money, until the law puts Wes out of the way. See how simple it is? A very clever man is Luke Osborn, Jim."

"I could stop that 'cleverness' like Wes stopped Joe," I muttered in youthful impetuousness.

Quong put a gentle hand on my arm. "Jim, you Americans do things fast. You hate fast, love fast, kill fast. Back . . . in the beyond time was of no essence. It is the same here, if you'll only let it be so. I am much older than you, Jim. *Much.* And I will be here a long time too. Let things be. I am here and I came for a reason. Promise me one thing now, pardner: that you won't kill Luke Osborn."

That scar at the base of his skull. All right, if he wanted to go on believing he'd lived a couple of thousand years before that was all right with me. I could see, even then, that his life *was* pretty serene, believing that when death came he'd just sort of take a temporary rest of a few hundred years and then bob up again some other place. I was to find out later that many other people believed the same thing and, because of it, were happy about it the way Mom had taught Lenore and me to look forward to what lay out beyond the Curtain. So let Quong believe what he wished.

"I won't promise you any such thing," I half growled.

WESLEY ALLEN went on trial in mid-April for the shooting of Joe Docker and we had to go over to Hoogan as witnesses. The District Attorney wasn't from our county, since his duties covered several counties. He was a pompous, cadaverous looking man in a high stiff collar who looked more like a side-burned minister or actor in a traveling show than a lawyer. It was his first term after getting jumped up from county attorney in the last election and he didn't lose any time calling it cold blooded, premeditated murder. Old Bob Johnston, the craggy cow town lawyer Dad had hired to defend Wes, said it was self defense. He pointed out the fact to the jury of ranchers and farmers that Joe was a proven card sharp. "Where was the proof?" demanded the prosecutor, voicing violent objections to the dead man's character being slandered in court.

This one brought guffaws until the judge rapped for order. Quong was called to the stand.

He told, under questioning, of the events in the school house that night preceding the shooting, of knowing Joe slightly at the ranch, of having played a "few hands" of poker at the same table where Joe played. Did he know anything about the dead man being a card sharp? A tin horn? A crooked cheat who would take away men's hard earned wages by marking the cards?

Quong admitted, to my smouldering chagrin, that he didn't. Was he an expert at cards himself? Had the deceased ever won any money off *him?*

Quong came down off the witness stand, leaving me baffled by his noncommittal answers. He knew that Joe had cheated. He could have exposed him anytime. He could have helped Wes out plenty by a display of his skill, for the cow country looked upon a dishonest gambler with as much hatred and contempt as it respected a "square" one. Yet the soft spoken Chinese had made no effort to improve Wes's side of the case.

He sat down in his chair beside me and I leaned over, half hissing into his ear: "What's the matter with you, Quong? You could have helped him

plenty telling what you know."

He nodded, looking ahead, not answering.

"Don't you want him to get out of this?" I demanded, finding it hard to keep my voice down.

He shook his head. "No, Jim."

"Why?"

"You forget Lenore. She'll come back. It would be best for her if Wes didn't." He said it, looking straight ahead, not turning to face me.

So he thought Wes would get off scott free and go gunning for *Lenore!* I sniffed and turned my attention to the court room again as my name was called. I got up and went forward through the railing gate and held up my right hand, placed my left on the Bible, swore to tell the truth, nothing but the truth, so help me God.

"Take the chair," the bailiff directed.

I stepped up and sat down, a little uneasy at facing two hundred other faces with eyes riveted upon me, waiting to hear what I had to say. Dad and Luke Osborn sat a few rows back of the railing, next to the aisle. Wes was at the table with old Bob, and near them sat Ed Brady and a deputy, Andy Calders with them to watch Wes. Not that anybody figured he was going to try and run away. Not for killing a tin horn card sharp whose gun was half out when Wes shot him.

It was a pretty foregone conclusion that crafty old Bob, who knew every man in the county, could get Wes off on a plea of self defense. Wes knew it too. You could see it in the lazy boredom in his eyes as he waited for the thing to end.

I told about Luke and Joe winning the boys' summer wages at the ranch —all except Slim's. He had held back most of his. No, I admitted, I hadn't actually seen them cheating because I wasn't an expert at marking a deck or catching a man who was.

More laughter that was like a rippling murmur went through the room and died down. I was still only sixteen.

The prosecutor came over, Bob having finished his examination. He had an idiotic, even professorial, way of pinching at the front of his stiff white collar until two dark dirt smudges showed on either side just above the flowing black tie. It was plain, something I saw in his eyes, that things weren't going the way he had wanted them and he was going to take it out on me. I braced myself, a little scared, watching Bob's leathery face, knowing he'd come to my rescue with objections if things got too rough. But I was still scared. I'd felt it in my voice, high pitched and off key, during those first kindly questions from Bob Johnston. My voice, not my answers, had brought scattered snickers from the crowd that left me red faced.

He started in on me rather easy. Wasn't it a fact that Joe had always lost out at the ranch instead of winning? Hadn't I disliked Joe from the first? Wasn't it a fact that the defendant Wesley Allen had, once before, lost a few dollars to the deceased in a small game and, being a poor loser, accused him of being a cheat? Did I know—

He was leaning forward now, forefinger levelled almost under my nose, the hairy Adam's Apple moving at the pleat in the collar. His voice was quivering in some kind of indignation, his buzzard eyes boring into mine. . . .

Did I know for sure that Wesley Allen had killed Joe Docker over gambling or was it my sister who had caused the killing? Wasn't it a fact, he demanded in a thundering voice, that Joe was a simple middle-aged man with whom she had deliberately flirted to

the extent of—

He was hinting more and I left the chair in a bound and landed on top of him. He went to the floor under my weight, and then I had him in front of the judge's stand mauling all hell out of him before Ed Baker and Andy came crashing over through chairs and tables and pulled me off, wrestling me away over in front of the jury box. Maybe Lenore was something of what he had hinted. Maybe she was a flirt who had caused the killing that probably would have happened in a matter of time anyhow.

But she was still my sister.

CHAPTER XII

THE courtroom was in an uproar. Everybody was on their feet, craning necks to see the fracas. Ed Baker still had me by the shoulder and was saying, "Easy now— Easy, Jim," while Andy went over to help the prosecutor to his feet. His collar with the smudged finger marks was loose and he leaned against his table, gasping and choking and trying, seemingly, to erase the print of my big fingers from his throat. "This . . . this," he kept trying to gasp out, "is an outrage. An un—" The blood was gone from his face and his hairy Adam's Apple pumped up and down convulsively.

The judge was on his feet, pounding and shouting for quiet and threatening to clear the courtroom. He was ordering everybody to sit down. Everybody sat down. All except one man. He came striding up the aisle and stopped in front of the railing gate and a hush like that of dead night settled over the spectators. They knew Ed Devers and the look on his face. Dad's eyes were sunken in, blood shot and inflamed from much liquor. He had lost weight and looked old . . . very old.

"My son did a damned good job," he said to the judge and to the still coughing prosecutor. "Fine him for contempt of court and I'll pay it. Fine me, if you wish. But if *one more word* is mentioned about my daughter in this courtroom I'll *kill* the man who utters it."

Then he went back in that explosive silence hanging on bated breaths and took his seat again beside Luke Osborn.

They let Wes off with a two year sentence for the killing of Joe Docker, the jury bringing in their verdict the following afternoon, after a two hour deliberation that must have been a hummer. I don't know whether my fracas with the prosecutor—which cost Dad fifty dollars for contempt of court—had any bearing on the case or the judge's decision. I got the impression it all revolved around whether or not Joe's gun fell out from under his coat after Wes shot him or whether he was pulling it. So the jury, trying to split a hair, brought in a verdict of guilty of manslaughter with recommendation for mercy. Ed Baker took Wes, now scowling his disappointment, out of the courtroom and over to the jail, to await transportation to Deer Lodge. I started to go over to say so-long but Dad figured it wouldn't do any good.

"He'd think you were feeling sorry for him, that wouldn't do," he said.

Dad had changed much toward me. It must have hit him pretty hard that night of the shooting when I had called his hand.

SUMMER came on. The spring roundup hadn't been much. When Dad had sold the shippers the previous fall, turning back around three hundred head of stockers, he had banked the money, shrewdly figuring that sometime during the winter a few of the ranchers above the basin, where hay wasn't so

plentiful, would run short of feed and be forced to sell off a portion of their stock at below market prices. It would have worked out that way too, except that the money hadn't gone for new stuff. It had flowed over Luke's gambling table and into the tills of the three saloons. By the end of that summer Dad didn't have a dime in the bank. He sold off a few head of our own stuff —stockers this time—and most of the horses.

We didn't need the horses too much anyhow. I was running the ranch with three regular hands and Quong.

I had one letter finally from Lenore that fall, in the midst of a pitiful effort at rounding up and shipping. There wasn't much stuff to ship. Thirty-five head. Not enough to fill two cattle cars; and it was noticeable that when we loaded Dad didn't come down to the pens. I don't think he had the heart. So I took the money and banked it, keeping out enough to pay off the boys.

I was riding from daylight until dark now, growing bigger and more gaunt all the time, trying hard to keep things going with too few horses. Quong and I lived in the ranch house now. He cooked the meals for us, kept the place clean, and rode all the time. It seemed kind of funny, looking at it one way. He ran the ranch when I was away and, at the same time, acted as a sort of housekeeper and cook. It was damned funny, seeing him take off his apron and then go down to boss the three hands.

So I stood in the post office that sharp, windy, afternoon and read the page and a half letter from Lenore. It was marked Ft. Worth, Texas, Slim's home. Slim was making the rodeos down south, picking up a little money riding in the bronc contests and doing fancy rope spinning. I got the idea that things weren't going very well with them. It wasn't what she had written; it was what she *didn't* write. And it all seemed pretty certain, one day the following spring, when I went into the saloon to see Andy for a few moments. I'd just got back from the hotel after hauling Dad there from down at Billie's. He'd been on a three day drunk that was a whizzer.

"You find him all right?" Andy asked. It had been Andy who had sent word out to the ranch. He usually dropped down by the house at least once in the evening to see how things were going and maybe pour himself a cup of coffee from the ever hot pot in Billie's kitchen.

"Yea," I nodded. "Thanks for letting me know, Andy."

"How is he?"

"I had to get some pills from the doc and knock him out first. I think even Billie was a little scared after he got to yelling at the big rats that were staring at him from all corners of the room. He must have been drinking everything from kerosene to embalming fluid."

Andy shook his head. "I'll go up after while and see how he's making out. I'll have the doc drop in too. Billie took pretty good care of him yesterday and then had two of the boys get him to bed. But he was back in an hour, trying to fight the rats again. It's sure too bad, Jim," and Andy shook his head again. "Too bad."

"He just won't get over Mom," I said. "But that would have been all right if Luke hadn't got hold of him. By the way, Mildred said you were up at the livery stable a few minutes ago looking for me."

"Yea," Andy said. "Because, Jim, I wouldn't be too suprised if you had *another* one on your hands. Take a look at who's sitting over there."

I turned my back to the bar and glanced over in a corner.

There, at a table, sat Slim Holcomb.

I went over. He was alone at a corner table, sitting there with a big double shot glass in front of him; empty. And I knew from his appearance that Andy had set it up and that Slim didn't have the money to buy another one.

"Hello, Slim," I said. "Boy, I'm glad to see you!"

He looked up and shook hands, nodding for me to sit down.

"How's things going?" I asked—and regretted the words almost before they were out.

THINGS weren't going. Slim looked seedy. His clothes were the same expensive ones as of old but they were ragged around the edges and dirty. He wore a four or five day crop of whiskers, and I knew from the grime on his hands that he must have come in on the local freight train. He looked as though he hadn't slept in a week.

"So-so," he shrugged. "Golly, you've sure growed a lot, kid. How much do you weigh now? How old are you?"

"I'm crowding a hundred and ninety, Slim. I'm past seventeen."

"Practically an old cowman, eh?" he half grinned and then the grin faded. "I should have known," he half muttered. "Lenore's nineteen."

"Where is she?" I asked eagerly.

He shrugged again. Moodily. "I don't know, Jim. She left me in San Francisco. A month ago. Said she was going to get herself a job."

I motioned for Andy but Slim shook his head. "I'm still a two drink man, Jim, except on occasion."

"This is an occasion. You're home."

Andy brought over the drinks and took the gold note and went back for change. We drank. He sat down the glass and wiped his lips with his sleeve. The sleeve of the once blue silk shirt had coal car grime on it too.

"When did you get in?" I asked him.

"Last night. I stayed down at Billie's. She gave me a spare bed upstairs. Your Dad was there but he didn't recognize me. I'm glad." He laughed bitterly.

I motioned for Andy and held up a thumb. That had been a joke with us for a long time. When you held up a thumb in Andy's place it meant to bring a quart. He brought it.

"This one's on the house, boys," he said. "A little present to celebrate Slim's coming home."

Wise old Andy! He instinctively knew that Slim's pride might prevent him from taking his old job back . . . and a quart of liquor can come in pretty handy sometimes. I poured us another, dawdling and waiting for Slim to talk. He finally opened the shell. I knew he wanted to get it out of his system, and I knew that any time a man like Slim Holcomb didn't bother to wash up and shave down at Billie's that he'd been hit pretty hard.

A couple of other men strolled in, laughing. They luckily didn't know Slim. He wouldn't be any too happy to see any of his friends now.

"I got one letter from her, down in Ft. Worth," I ventured. "She didn't say much."

"Yea. I was doing all right teaming for a big street contractor there. Making good money skinning four. In between times I pulled down a little at rodeos and celebrations, like barbeques and such, hitting the bronks and roping. Figured I could lease a small spread in another year and branch out. My mother has a little money. She was going to help out. But I guess, Jim, that Lenore had too much snow in her blood. So I had to give it up and move on. The break came in San Francisco. I gave her all the money I had and worked my way by boat to Seattle, then went over to Butte. God, life is funny

sometimes."

I asked him if he'd heard about Wes. I wanted to find out how come Lenore and Slim ran away that night, but didn't try. I'd have bet that Lenore didn't have the courage to face the townsfolk again after the shooting and had used Slim as a means of avoiding it.

Slim hadn't heard about Wes. "I sure hate it," he said. "Two years, eh? I always liked old Wes. He was a little ornery when he got drunk or maybe woke up with a hangover but he was a good old boy. Don't know why they ever convicted him of downing that tin horn. They shoulda give him a medal."

"You want a job?" I asked.

We didn't need another hand on the ranch, the Lord knew. Not with the pitifully few head grazing the Devers brand. But he was one of the family—the family that I was so desperately still trying to keep as a fixture in my mind. I knew it was gone; I knew it deep down in my heart. But underneath it all was some kind of a hope, some kind of a far away dream that someway, somehow we might one day all get back together again.

MY brother-in-law looked at me and essayed a grin that had a fair something of the old easy going Slim Holcomb in it. "Thanks, Jim. You're okay. But I'm not a button anymore. No, I don't want a job back at the ranch. I'll maybe look around town here and perhaps talk to Ed when he sobers up."

We had another drink in front of us. I was getting a little high but was holding him one for one. The sandwich and coffee I had picked up at old Ching's had helped a lot. He had an empty stomach.

"You're coming out to the ranch," I told Slim. "We're kind of behind on all that south fence and are going to try to catch up this fall and winter. You can work the barb wire and posts until the ground freezes and then hit the rails further back. In case you haven't already heard, we're low on stock; but I'm going to get a loan through the bank at Hoogan and buy up a couple of hundred head of good feeder stuff for spring shipment. One thing about that spread: you can put up more hay on it than any ranch in Montana. I think we can make some extra money, and me and Quong will need some help."

"Quong," he grinned musingly, pouring. The liquor was beginning to relax the tension that had been in his eyes. "Now there's a gent for you, Jim. Never gets worried about anything. Just goes his way as smooth as grease and you never know what he's thinking."

"He's turning into a first rate hand," I admitted. "Of course, when he builds a loop too big and gets his horse tangled up in it we have to put a new horn on the saddle where he's choked the other one off hanging on. . . ."

We both laughed. "I always admired that Chinese for some reason or other, all right," Slim nodded. "He grows on a man. Even Lenore used to talk about him when we were down in Texas. I'd sure like to see him and Susie— But what the hell! No, Jim, I'm not coming back to the ranch."

I saw it was of no use. His pride wouldn't let him come back, even to get the saddle I'd picked up in Hoogan, along with Lenore's, and brought back to the ranch with the horses. The saddle was now wrapped in burlap in the stable where Susie had slobbered over her first nipple full of cow milk.

He downed his drink at a gulp and I poured him another. Luckily I had brought in the rig to get Dad from Billie's up to the hotel and to pick up

some groceries at the store.

"How is Susie?" he asked, when conversation fell between us.

"Growing like a gourd vine?" I grinned. "Eats her fool head off, owns the ranch, and follows Quong around like a dog."

"That dog-goned Chinaman," he grinned back, and reached for the bottle once more.

He was far over his two drink limit by now.

CHAPTER XIII

HE WAS down across the table, head buried in his arms and sound asleep, when I finally brought the rig around to the front door and yanked them to a halt. I threw the reins off on the ground and got clumsily down, grabbing at a wheel to steady myself. Andy came from back of the bar.

"He's sure got a load on, Jim," Andy said.

"So have I," I snickered, throwing an arm around his neck.

A man came by. A man in moccasins and wearing a dirty pair of pants and shirt came padding by. He had greasy black hair and carried another pair of the moccasins on a string over his shoulder. He was a whopping big man for an Indian; six feet four.

"Hold on a minute, Charley," I said.

Charley Two-Paint-Ponies pulled up. "Oh . . . hullo, Jim. How you goin'?"

"Hey, Charley, did you ever sell Quong a pair of those footgear?" I demanded.

"Huh? Quong? Oh, sure no. I sell Ching. He gimme three ham an' eggs and a pint of whiskey. Hey, Jim, you wanta drink?"

He was fumbling at the front of the dirty shirt. I told him no and went on inside to where Andy was bent over Slim.

"He's sure got a load on," Andy said again.

"It's lucky for me he has," I grunted, speaking a little slowly because I was having trouble with my tongue. It didn't want to follow instructions. "Otherwise I'd never have got the old sonuvagun out to the ranch. Give me a hand, Andy. Dam', he's heavy. Come on, Slim. Come on old feller. You're practically home already."

We got his arms up around our necks and more or less walked him stumblingly to the outside. His legs were dragging now, head sunk far down on his chest. Slim was still a two-drink man. We got him up in the rig and Andy went back after his hat. Slim toppled over against me, still out.

"He's sure as the devil drunk," Andy grinned, a touch of pity in his voice, passing up Slim's hat. He passed up a quart, too. "Pay me next time you're in town. Slim'll probably need it when he wakes up in the morning."

I pulled the cork with my teeth and took a drink, swigging hard. I was pretty drunk by now. "I'm not sure there'll be any of it left in the morning, Andy. You know us Devers—whole hog or nothing in love, war, or a fight. *Whoopee!* Git out of here, you broom tails. We're heading for the ranch in quick time."

That was quite a trip back to the ranch, with me hitting the bottle hard all the way and the ponies galloping and trotting by turns; and once, for about two hundred yards, I laid on the lines just to see how fast they could run. Slim had slid down out of the seat and was crumpled up against my left leg. I put the leather against the team's rump's and sang to the night. The Devers family was out . . . gone like a flame blown from a candle, leaving all in pitch black darkness. I was in darkness, fumbling for I knew not

what; grasping for any straw that would bring back the past as it had been.

It was hunger; kid hunger for parents, a sister who was different—hunger for something that had been when Mom was with us. It was all gone now and I drove the team drunkenly, crazily, loping them across the basin toward the ranch house.

I WAS singing and whooping as we wheeled past the front veranda and hauled to a skidding stop by the kitchen door, Slim still doubled up beside my leg, dead to the world.

"Quong!" I bellowed. *"Quong!"*

His familiar figure, an apron around the waist, appeared in the lighted doorway. "That you, Jim? You sound as though—"

"I am! Get some blankets and take 'em down to the bunkhouse for Slim. I've got him here with me. Sure, I'm pie-eyed, you danged Chinese. I'm drunker'naskunk. Gessumblankets!"

I lashed the team around, hauling sharp on the reins, and pulled them up, still blowing hard, before the bunkhouse door. My foot slipped off the wheel hub and I landed flat on the ground, laughing and kicking at the bunkhouse door.

Everything was pretty blurry but I felt good. The stars seemed to have closed down close and were almost within reach above the flat top of the box-shaped log structure. I let out a whoop and got to my feet.

"Goodbye, Marianna, I'm off to Montana," I sang, reeling as I kicked open the bunkhouse door. "Come on, Slim. Wake up! Get in there and get some sleep—and don't forget to hang up your clothes. You're home again. Your saddle's in the stable and there's work to do. Come on, Slim, my dear brother-in-law! Wake up. *Goodbye, Marianna . . .*"

I lay down on the bench beside the wall and tried to kick the water pail off its hook, above my head. A light went on inside and somebody started cursing. They were all new hands. The old ones had gone; drifted. Quong came through the night, his arms filled with blankets. I was still on my back on the bench, kicking at the dangling pail and singing about Marianna going to Montana.

One of the hands came out in his underclothes and Quong spoke, giving him the blankets. They got Slim inside and to bed. Quong came back out. I had one of the ponies around the neck and was trying to give it a drink out of the bottle.

"Come on up to the house and go to bed, pardner," the Chinese said.

"I don't want to go to bed," I whooped. "No Devers ever goes to bed before midnight. Maybe Lenore. She'd be the kind who likes to go to bed—with a man anyhow."

"You're drunk," he said, a hard note in his voice.

"Sure I'm drunk," I grinned, hoisting the bottle that the horse had declined. "I'm a Devers, ain't I? We all drink and love hard, don't we? Dad drinks hard. Lenore loves—"

He slapped me then. He slapped the living hell out of me. I swung on him and hit empty air. He got some kind of a hold on me and forced me up to the house. We went up the steps, threshing and wrestling—but we went up. I out weighed him by a good forty pounds but . . . we went up. He got me into bed and the bed started spinning. It turned crazy somersaults and so did the lamp on the table.

"Great God, but I'm sick," I suddenly mumbled.

He went in and got a dishpan from the kitchen, placing it on the floor be-

side the bed. "You're not sick, Jim," he said. "You don't know what the meaning of the word is until you've tried a big pipe of opium. I'm going down and unharness the team."

"Don't turn out the lamp, Quong," I groaned. "The damn room is trying to—" I rolled over to the edge of the bed and let go into the dishpan.

God, but I was sick.

HE HAD coffee boiling the next morning when I came into the kitchen, still somewhat unsteady on my feet, the inside of my mouth tasting about like a steaming dung pile looks. I was cold sober, having slept it off, but still dizzy. I soused my head into a basin of cold water and sloshed around like a whale, blowing and cursing as some of it ran down my back. The towel came off the nail on the wall and I went to the door.

One of the hands was just coming out of the bunkhouse. "Hey, George," I yelled. "Is Slim up yet?"

"That new fellow you brought home last night? He's getting up now."

"He's not a new fellow—he's my brother-in-law. Tell him to come on up for breakfast. Coffee's about ready."

Slim didn't come up for about thirty minutes. He'd found his war bag and changed to clean clothes and was freshly shaven, his reddish brown hair combed with every hair in place. Except for a certain haunting look in his eyes, he looked a lot like the Slim Holcomb of old. It was plain that the break up of his marriage had torn the heart out of him.

"How are you feeling?" I grinned at him, after he and Quong shook hands.

We sat down to steaming mush, hot biscuits, ham and eggs and coffee. "I'll be all right if I don't try to take too long a step at a time," he grinned back, ruefully. "I'll stick to my two drinks from now on."

We finished breakfast and he got up, cigarette at a corner of his mouth. I told him where to find his saddle and bridle.

"What do you want me to do today?" he asked.

"Quong'll get you lined out. I've got to go back to town first thing. Forgot to get some concrete dead men to anchor down the corner posts on the south fence."

That was the Devers in me. We could have cut three foot lengths of post and buried them deep with the wire looped around, twisting it taught to hold the corner posts upright. But Dad had never believed in doings things in a half way manner and neither was I going to do things by halves. I wanted concrete dead men.

"I want to see how Dad is this morning anyhow," I added.

I hooked up a span of ponies to the light wagon and trotted off across the basin while Slim put a mattox and spade on his saddle and rode down to dig trenches for the anchors. I drove in town to the store, loaded the hollow oblong blocks, and left the team at the livery, stopping a minute to chat with Ruth.

"How's Hal coming along?" I asked.

"About the same, Jim. Your Dad was down to the house to see him last week. How are things at the ranch?"

"Pretty good. Slim came in last night. That is . . . I took him out home last night."

Her gentle eyes expressed much as she nodded. She had always thought a lot of Slim. "I heard he was back and I'm glad. Maybe . . . things will work out all right in time. I—I hope so, Jim."

"They probably will," I replied, expressing something certainly I didn't feel.

DAD wasn't up when I reached the hotel not far away. He was still sound asleep when I cautiously opened the door and looked in. So I closed it and went over to Ching's to get a quart pitcher of coffee. The old man nodded and smiled as he always had since the days when Lenore and I had hollered at him when we rode our ponies in town to school.

"Hy, Ching," I said suddenly. "You know old Charley Two-Paint-Ponies, who makes the moccasins and then buys liquor with the money?"

"I sabbe. You want cleam? Sugu?"

"Put 'em in. But leave the coffee good and hot. Did you ever buy any moccasins from Charley and give 'em to Quong when he first came?"

He brought over the steaming pitcher and took the quarter. I asked the question again. I wanted to find out where Quong had got those moccasins. Ever since he'd come out of a blank, walking across our south range with a bad cut at the base of his skull, I'd wondered about where he came from.

"He clome. Walk long long way. Shilk shippers wore out. Feet sore. I give him leather shippers flom Chargey Tlo-Plaint."

"You don't know where he came from before that?"

"No sabbe."

He turned back to his stove and I got up and went out. So Ching didn't know either. Quong had come to him, his black silk slippers in shreds from walking miles in a daze, and old Ching had given his countryman the moccasins he'd bought from Charley for a bottle of whiskey and two or three meals of ham and eggs. I shrugged and went on over to Dad's room.

He sat up in bed and drank the coffee. "How's things at the ranch?"

I told him about Slim coming back; about the fence and that maybe we ought to get a loan at the bank over at the county seat and buy some feeders. It looked like a good summer ahead with excellent prospects for plenty of feed. Various rivulets from a shallow creek cut a half dozen ambling paths through the basin before connecting up again at the lower end, which was why we had more wild hay than any rancher in the county. Grass was already coming up green. If we could get the right kind of stuff at the right price, I argued, there would be a fair chance of picking up a nice profit when we shipped them that fall."

But Dad killed my hopes. "Let's let the loan go for awhile, son," he said. "You know how I always hated debts."

I thought of his IOU's to Luke, which he had made good with checks, and didn't say much. Just one more try:

"But, Dad, we've got a chance to make some money. And, besides, it won't be a debt. The bank can get its money back on the cattle anytime. All we'd be out is the grazing and we've got five times as much feed as we need for the present herd."

"We'll let it go for awhile, Jim. I might have the cash in a few days. I won twenty-five hundred dollars off Luke Osborn three or four nights ago."

I stared at him, maybe a little open mouthed. I couldn't believe my ears. "You *won* off Luke?"

CHAPTER XIV

HE SEEMED to take pleasure in my astonishment. The fifteen hours of sleep induced by the pills the doctor had given him had cleared his head of the rats. He was pretty shaky but feeling g o o d otherwise. He actually grinned. Twenty-five hundred.

"That's right, Jim. Of course I didn't win it all off Luke. He only came out about fifteen hundred loser. But Ike

McCauley and Joe Hodge were in the game. They'd just sold off a batch of pooled spring stuff and were loaded for bear. White chips," he added, grinning again, "were a hundred apiece. That was one time I really took Luke."

"How about some of it?" I asked. I still couldn't get it through my head how he had managed to win off a crooked tin horn like Luke. It didn't add up. "The boys at the ranch are running a little low and could use a month's wages."

He nodded carelessly toward his pants crumpled on the floor and told me to take what I needed. I picked them up and went through all the pockets. There was about four dollars in silver.

I let the pants drop back to the floor. "Good God, Dad!" I burst out angrily. "You mean to tell me you blew twenty-five hundred in three nights down at Billie's place?"

He didn't answer for a moment, but sat there running fingers through his touseled grey hair. Then a sigh went out of his lungs. "I guess it was pretty much of a toot at that," he admitted, almost carelessly. "But never mind—there's more where that came from. I'll hit it again in a few days. We'll get the cows."

He placed the pitcher in his left hand on the chair beside the bed and swung his woolen underweared legs over the side, rubbing sleep from his stubble whiskered face with both palms. Boot steps sounded outside and Luke Osborn came in.

He was dressed immaculately in the same kind of suit Joe Docker had worn the night Wes Allen shot him at the dance and his face told that he'd just come from his morning trip to the barber's. His white shirt was freshly laundered, the black string tie neat and in place. He wore a black Stetson to offset his carefully brushed blond locks. The mustache was now a long corn silk handlebar and he looked fit and in the pink of health. He looked damned prosperous too. Not like a man who had lost fifteen hundred in a poker game three nights before.

"Hello, Jim," he said in warm friendliness. "Holy smokes, you're getting to be a giant. Actually a bit taller than me now. You were big enough that night last winter at the dance when you lost your head and, with that slant-eye, started trying to clean up on your Dad's best friend. How's the ranch?"

"When I left," I said sourly, "it was still there."

"Heard from Lenore lately? I was always fond of all of you, you know."

"I didn't know," I returned. "You might tell Slim Holcomb. He's out there with us again."

He let that one slide by and turned to Dad, asking how he felt, and Dad said, "Not too bad for an old buzzard, Luke. I'll feel a lot better after I get some breakfast down on top of the coffee Jim just brought. That was quite a little fandango for an old man. About the best I ever pulled. I don't remember much about the past two days."

"I was coming down last night to get you," Luke Osborn said. "But Billie said as how Jim here had already loaded you in a rig and got you up here."

Dad looked at me. It was his turn to be surprised. "Did you pack me all the way inside and upstairs?" He was looking at me appraisingly.

I NODDED and Luke laughed. "Sure, he did, Ed. I told you not more than a week ago that your son is already the biggest man in town. But put on your clothes and let's go get breakfast. I want you to take a ride with me today and look over some of Ike McCauley's stuff. Not bad for the price. Want a

morning snifter?"

Dad took one from the bottle Luke pulled from beneath his coat. He took a big one and then held it out, but I shook my head. I noticed that Luke hardly touched the bottle; not more than a teaspoonful.

I left them in the room and headed straight across the tracks for Billie's house down among the trees, getting madder every minute. Roll Dad, would she? Get greedy and take him for about two thousand, after all the money that the boys had spent for drinks and entertainment at her place. She had always played pretty fair with all the boys; loaning them money when they were short and even feeding them occasionally; but then, I figured, the remnants of the twenty-five hundred had proved too tempting. I stepped up on the porch, drumming an oversized fist against the door. The windows rattled.

The front door blind went up and then Billie herself unlocked and swung open the door, a spoon in one hand. She was in her early thirties and quite a handsome woman. Ordinarily in such a small town as Montrose the womenfolk would have got together and had her chased out. But not Billie. There never had been a destitute family yet but who had, through Andy Calders, received grocery and rent money to help tide them over until things got better. One ranch hand over north of Joe Hodge's place had spent an entire winter under her roof, hobbling around on crutches until his smashed ankle healed enough for him to get back into a saddle. When she made her buying trips to the store in town not a man who met her failed to raise his hat.

That was Billie who opened the door for me that morning.

"Why, Jim Devers," she exclaimed. "What are you doing down here at ten o'clock in the morning? Come on in and have a cup of coffee. But Elsie isn't up yet and you know we don't open up until late this evening."

I went into the kitchen, reluctantly. She set out a cup and poured, sliding over a cream pitcher. "How's your Dad this morning, Jim? You ought to try to get him to lay off drinking for awhile. He's killing himself. But you already know what shape he was in when you came after him last night."

"That's why I came down this morning too," I said shortly; and then with youthful bluntness: "Billie, I came after that twenty-five hundred dollars —or what was left of it, that you cleaned Dad of the past three days."

She was putting the coffee pot back on the stove. Now she turned, her eyes widening in genuine surprise. *"Twenty-five hundred!* Why, Jim, I didn't take his money. He spent a lot in here, buying drinks for everybody who came in. Wouldn't let anybody pay for a thing. But twenty-five—"

"How much did he spend?" I demanded, warily, still unconvinced.

"About four hundred. Not any more than that. He gave Elsie fifty dollars as a present and tried to give me a hundred. I wouldn't take it, though he had an awful wad of money on him. Said he had won it playing poker off Luke Osborn. I don't like Luke and I didn't like the way he kept hanging around your Dad while he was spending so freely. I wondered—"

She didn't have to say another word. It was all clear now.

Luke Osborn!

The tin horn had caught Dad when he was either passed out or sleeping it off. He had got back his fifteen hundred and then a few hundred more besides.

Quong had been right. A very clever man.

I WENT back up town in a fit of killing rage, imagining all sorts of wild gun fights in which I'd pace up the middle of the street with old Harley's two guns on and call Luke a cheat in front of all the people and shoot him down with two flaming .44-40's. They would cheer me and call me a hero and say that I had rid the town of a no-good skunk. . . .

I actually didn't do anything of the kind; I was remembering Wes and where he was. The family was gone. The money really didn't matter. Luke would have got it back anyhow over his tables. It didn't make much difference whether he rolled Dad for it or took it on his own crooked deals. But the family. . . . There might be a chance that some way, somehow, I could half way pull it together again.

I couldn't do it by killing Luke Osborn.

I went back to the hotel to try and find Dad to get him out to the ranch for a few days, but he was gone. He and Luke had ridden out to Ike McCauley's place over north of Montrose.

Slim almost instantly dropped back into ranch routine, working hard and not talking much. He wasn't the same old easy going Slim Holcomb I had known a year before. He was moody; brooding over Lenore as Dad brooded over Mom. The big difference was that Slim didn't take to drink. He got into the habit of slipping off Sunday mornings and riding to Montrose; real early. I thought he was visiting Ruth until Johnny Barker, junior, told me the truth: Slim was attending Sunday morning services in the little church not far from the school house. His months of married life with Lenore had been full, lying with her in his arms at night and loving her so much. It had been a revelation, compared to his single days, and now he was back again, alone, and life wasn't the same as before. He seemed to be grasping out for something to take the place of her; and trying to find it in the words of John Barker every Sunday morning.

He was a forlorn, unhappy, miserable man, working like a plow horse and not talking much. Even Andy missed him in the saloon.

So things rolled on until the spring day Quong and I had a young stud colt down in the corral, staked out, emasculating him into a gelding when Wesley Allen came out from town in a livery rig, driven by Ruth Rogers. It was about four in the afternoon and Slim was down among the rocks south of the ranch, where Quong had found Susie, pushing back into the basin a few head of heavy footed, lumbering cows ready to calve. I wanted them to drop their young in the basin where feed and water from the wandering fingers of the creek were plentiful, remembering what had happened to Susie's mother. Ruth waved a greeting to us and then drove her father's rig back toward town.

Wes came over into the corral.

He was still pretty well tanned but he looked a lot older. It took only a glance to see that the shooting, followed by a year in prison, had changed him a lot. He was cold now; unemotional. He shook hands with me and I might well have clamped on to the tail of a dead fish. They had let him out on good behavior.

He nodded curtly to Quong and said casually, "How's it going?"

"We're making out," I said. "Did you run into Dad in town?"

"Yea," he said.

HE ROLLED a cigarette and sat down on the helpless stud's shoulder, watching while Quong and I finished. I was thinking about Slim, won-

dering how I was going to tell him that Lenore's husband was back at the ranch ahead of him. I dreaded the thought of the two coming face to face. They once had been close friends, easy going cow hands who worked and laughed and drank together without a care in the world. It wouldn't be that way anymore, I was certain. Lenore stood between them, a dark shadow with two green laughing eyes and a petulant mouth. She had been Wes's girl and he would have expected her to be waiting for him when he got out of the penitentiary. She hadn't waited; she had run away with his best friend the night Wes had, because of her, shot down Joe Docker.

But they had to meet and I figured it was well to break the ice beforehand. I broke it.

"Slim's back, Wes," I said off handedly. "Been here for several weeks now." I didn't have to tell him about the marriage. Andy had written him a couple of letters.

"Yea?" he said.

That was all. But his eyes seemed to fleck; hard. He pulled on the cigarette and stared down at the toe of his boot. So I let him have the rest of it.

"I guess you already know through Andy that she married him the night you—uh—got in trouble. But she quit him down in California. San Francisco, I think. I don't suppose it matters a damn, but she'd have quit you the same way."

The "Yea?" came again. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe not."

He didn't ask any questions about her, nor could I have answered them. We hadn't heard a line from her since I'd got that one brief letter postmarked Ft. Worth, Texas. We didn't know where she was or what she was doing.

I used the hot iron on the severed cords and tossed it over the fence to cool in the dirt. Quong bent and untied the ropes and Wes got up. The gelded colt regained its feet, awkwardly, and the three of us opened the gate and walked over toward the house. A rider was jogging toward the ranch from the south end of the basin.

"There comes Slim now," I said.

"Yeah," Wes Allen said.

CHAPTER XV

SLIM jogged on past the lower corral and rounded the corner of the bunkhouse, his fence building tools still on the saddle. In between pushing cows back he was working on the fence. He saw Wes and then reined away from the corral, loping his pony over to where we stood. There was surprise in his eyes but real pleasure too as he swung down with a jangle of spur rowels. He extended his hand.

"Why, Wes, you old sonuvagun! Dog-gone, but I'm glad to see you back, boy!" and I breathed a slight sigh of relief. Everything was going to be all right.

They shook and Wes replied, "Howdy. How's it goin'?"

"Oh, so-so, I guess. Back in the old rut again. Come on over to the bunkhouse, Wes. I got a bottle hid away just waiting for something like this. Just like old . . ." he caught himself too late . . . "times," he finished awkwardly.

But if Wes noticed the slip he didn't say anything. We all went over together, Quong looking at me and winking. He was pretty happy too, now that things were going to be all right between Slim and Wes Allen. I remembered his warning at the trial about wanting Wes put away but this looked like Quong was all wrong. Things would work out.

Wes might have come back some-

what embittered but he was still enough of a cow country man to know that Lenore was Slim's wife now and that ended it between him and her.

Wes picked up his canvas bag by the door and carried it inside. The other hands hadn't come in yet, so the four of us had the place to ourselves. Slim hauled out the quart bottle and gave Wes a snort. He smacked his lips and began to fix up his old bunk. We all took a pull at the bottle; all except Quong.

"Dog-gone it, Quong, how come you never drink?" Slim asked the grinning Chinese. "I don't drink much of the stuff myself but I don't figger it hurts too much for a man to have a little one now and then. But you never take any. How come?"

"I just don't like the darned stuff," Quong replied.

Slim and me leaned back and roared, and even Wes joined in. No matter how westernized Quong might be in dress and speech, he was still a Chinese and the words had sounded funny.

"Ain't he a sight though, Jim?" Slim laughed, looking at the Chinese rider. "Looks just like any regular Montana cow hand except for them slant eyes. He sure looks a lot different than he did that day two years ago when he showed up on the ranch with that bandage around his head. How come you got slant eyes, Quong?"

"Squinting at the Chinese girls, Slim. Some are very beautiful, you know."

"You bet I know—I saw 'em in San Francisco," and that brought an awkward pause. He had slipped again. Lenore had quit him in San Francisco. He recovered quickly, taking it out on Quong, speaking to me: "He won't drink, he won't go to Bilile's, the sonuvagun don't even whistle. Now you take most of the boys: they go around whistling all day when they're feeding or building fence, but not a peep out of Quong. Let's hear you whistle, Quong."

"No can do, Slim. Chinese don't whistle. Ching says it's an old superstition. Supposed to bring bad luck."

WE HAD another apiece. Wes was opening the mouth of the canvas bag he had brought home from prison. "How's things in town?" he finally asked, apparently to make conversation.

"All right, I guess," I said. "Ruth's dad is pretty sick now—a lot worse than he was. Hasn't been out of bed in months. I got a hunch Ruth and Mildred will have to take over the livery by themselves one of these days. Hal keeps spitting up more blood all the time. Something wrong with his lungs or stomach. Dad gets over to see him now and then between poker sessions in Luke's."

"Well," put in Slim, "if Ruth takes over, then there'll sure be plenty of business from every cow hand around. Even the town loafers will be buying horses if she starts running that place by herself. She's sure turned into a beautiful girl this past year. Or didn't you notice, you dog-goned loafing cow hand?" this last to Wes.

"I'm way ahead of you, you fence building polecat," Wes grinned, reaching for the bottle again. "Ruth and me are going to the dance Saturday night."

Somehow I was glad, for Wes's sake. Ruth now was an amazingly lovely girl not quite turned eighteen; very tall with a certain kind of cleanness and wholesomeness about her that had half the eligible men in town falling all over themselves to get her attention. She had inherited the mantle left by Lenore as the prettiest girl in the county. And Wes was older now; he had been through a lot. Going with her steady might make him forget Le-

nore and the tragedy she had caused both him and his best friend. They might hit it off and things get back like they had been in the old days.

Wes had his stuff out of the war bag now, including three beautiful horse hair headstalls made in prison. Quong picked up one and his almond shaped eyes began to light up excitedly.

"Holy cow!" he ejaculated. "Wes, where did you get these? Buy them?"

"Where'd you think?" Wes grinned sourly. "I learned to make 'em in prison. You want one?"

"I'll give you twenty-five dollars for this one. I want it for Susie. I'm going to start riding her soon."

"Okay," Wes agreed, carelessly.

"Now all I need is a good bit that won't hurt her mouth," Quong said, happily.

Slim had gone one over his two drink limit and was feeling high; and there couldn't be any doubt about his happiness at Wes's coming "home." I think he was genuinely tickled at the knowledge that Wes was going to start keeping company with Ruth Rogers. So Slim looked at Quong, snickering.

"Yep, you just dog-goned sure enough ought to put a bit on that headstall, Quong. And some reins too. A headstall, even one of Wes's fancy hoss hair ones, ought to have a bit and reins. Susie wouldn't be much good as a cutting hoss without 'em. If you got her started in the direction of Montrose, after a cow, and found out you had plumb forgot to put a bit and reins on that fancy headstall you might end up over in Hoogan with everybody out in the streets hollering, 'Here he comes,' and 'There he went.' "

"I want to see him the first time he tops that mule," I laughed at Slim. "Quong's riding a double rigged saddle now and I know that Susie is just going to *love* that second band under her belly. When he gets ready to top her we'll all get a blanket by the four corners and wait. That way we can run over and catch him when he comes down."

Quong grinned, quite unabashed at the laughter. He turned his back and opened the front of one of the black silk shirts he got by mail from Seattle. I was sitting across from the others in such a manner that the money belt filled with gold hundred notes was in full view. I had never, even in the Hoogan bank, seen so much money at one time. It was amazing that Quong had lived as one of us for so long and never let is be suspected that he carried that belt. He adjusted his shirt again, gave Wes a twenty gold note, brought out five silver dollars from his pocket and handed them over too.

"I think I'll go over and start supper, Jim," he said, picking up his new prize.

"Make it for four, Quong," I said. "Wes and Slim can bring up the bottle and we'll help you. It'll be just like old times."

QUONG went out fondling the bridle stall, like a kid with a new toy. Wes was rumpling up the straw in his old bunk. He looked up on the wall and there were old Harley's guns. Somehow I hadn't had the heart to try them out on a few of the jacks. I'd just oiled and loaded them and left them there.

"Poor old Harley," Wes said. "He was a good old gent. I'll bet them two guns could tell a lot of stories."

"He left them to me," I nodded, getting up and stretching. "But somehow I never got around to shooting them."

Wes took down the two weapons from their sagging holsters and examined them, clicking the cylinders by slow turns. He shook his head and replaced the .44-40's in the sheaths on the wall. "He was a grand old gent,"

he said.

The four of us had steak for supper that night, and what with the bottle and the supper together Wes Allen loosened up and became his old self again. Next morning he went back to work; and, like Slim, dropped into routine as easily as though he had never been away. He devoted his time in town to Ruth Rogers, and it got to be a Sunday morning ritual to see him and Slim ride off across the basin together, Slim to slip off to church and Wes to go over to Ruth's house to spend the day. We were having a dance about every Saturday night now, and nobody seemed to pay much attention to Wes that first Saturday night he came in with Ruth. I remember that I had the second dance with her and as we floated off across the floor I asked how she and Wes were making out.

"Why, pretty good, I guess, Jim." She had to look up to talk, I was that tall, inching past six feet now. "I was a little worried that first day I drove him out to the ranch in the rig. He seemed so changed. But I guess he had a right to, after what he went through. But I think he'll be all right. Look at him."

I glanced over to where Wes stood by an open window. His hair was fresh cut and the orange colored silk kerchief he wore set off to good advantage one of Slim's expensive shirts. In summer, when it was so hot, we mostly used the silk kerchiefs to cover our hands held around the girls' waists. It kept the sweat from staining their dresses. Wes was laughing and talking with a group of friends and appeared to be having the time of his life. Slim had just gone over to a young ranch woman we all knew, nursing a first child and talking with her mother, and I heard him drawlingly ask if she'd mind tying off that yearling long enough to dance with him.

It was a little like the old days of a couple of years back.

"Have you heard from Lenore yet?" Ruth asked.

I shook my head. "Not a line in months. How's your Dad?"

Her eyes took on a troubled look. "He's pretty sick, Jim. Much worse. I really shouldn't have come tonight. I didn't want to except that Wes had a date with me and I thought, for his sake, I ought to come."

The strange thought occurred to me that perhaps she was a little afraid of Wes because he had killed a man. He had done it at this same school house not too many months back. But it might have been something else: a womanly intuition that told her that, underneath, he wasn't the same old Wes. That he was a little hard now. I had seen it in his mein that first day when he came back to the ranch, in the hard flecking of his eyes, in his quiet, "Yea?"

I still wouldn't have liked to believe it, however, until the day, some weeks later, that he went on a three day drunk in town and got into a fight in Andy Calders' saloon. He came back with a swollen jaw and one eye closed.

Luke Osborn, when I saw him, didn't look very bad; just a slight cut above his right eye. They had got into it over Joe Docker. Andy had pulled them apart, arrested them, and got them fined over in Hoogan for fighting.

I half expected that Dad would fire Wes on account of that fight. He was with Luke all the time now. The man literally had him in his power, though Dad talked differently. He and Luke were making plans. Big plans. The store was flourishing and they were talking about buying and selling big lots of cattle, using the ranch for feed

between sales. I thought of the one hundred and ninety head we had left, no money in the bank, and Dad still losing at cards. I felt a little sorry for him, knowing that even if they did start buying Luke would take it all back at cards anyhow.

Dad was hitting the skids fast and didn't know it.

BUT he didn't fire Wes. He didn't say a word to him when he rode out to the ranch one evening a couple of days after that fight and said that Ruth's dad, Hal Rogers, was dead. He had died shortly after twelve o'clock noon.

"Hal!" I gasped out, still unable to believe it. "Good lord, Dad, that's awful. That leaves just her and Mildred all alone to carry on with the livery."

"I know, son," he replied, leading his horse out to the corral. "It had to happen sometime, just like mother had to go when you and Lenore were little tykes. It'll be the same with all the rest of us, when the time comes. But Ruth will probably be getting married one of these days, if my guess is right. Wes could do all right taking care of that livery, if he'd cut out getting drunk and fighting."

"When are they going to bury?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. You get Wes and Slim first thing in the morning and go in to help dig the grave."

"All right," I said. "But I sure feel sorry for Ruth. She's such a sweet kid."

He looked at me, a humorous glint in his eyes. "Yes, she's a sweet 'kid,' *old man*. And how do you mean, you're sorry for her: on account of their losing Hal or on account of it looks pretty likely that she'll be marrying Wes one of these days?"

"One would be just about as bad as the other," I grunted bluntly. "Wes might fool a lot of people, but I'm working with him every day. He's turning mean, Dad."

"How come now?"

"He don't talk much—"

"A lot of men don't talk much. He's got a pretty good reason not to talk, after being in the penitentiary."

"It's more than that. First of all, it's a dozen little things that don't mean much until you put them all together. But it's still more. Remember old Harley's guns that we left on the wall? How I oiled and loaded them, figuring to try a few at the jackrabbits one of these day? Well . . . Dad, them guns ain't on the wall anymore. After Wes's fracas with Luke they're down in his war bag under his bunk."

We were at the corral gate now. I opened it and Dad led the horse through. We walked on over to the stable together to unsaddle. "Hmm," he said thoughtfully, and frowned.

He frowned again, pulling at the cinch buckle. "Wes hasn't got any reason to be worried about Luke, Jim. If you can get that across to him, in an off handed sort of way, it might save trouble. Luke had to fight him in town to protect himself, Wes being pretty drunk. But Luke is too intelligent a man to get into a gun fight with Wes—"

"He used to pack hardware out here on the ranch, don't forget," I cut in, reaching over for the saddle horn and hauling the kak from the horse's sweaty back. I slung it over a manger pole in the stall where Susie once had slept close by Quong. He undid the throat latch and slipped off the bridle, the horse ambling out into the corral.

"And you notice that he stayed out of trouble too," he shot back, a little angrily. "People let him alone. But Luke is coming up now. He's going to be a big man in Montrose one of these

days. And he can't afford to kill anybody like Wes. We've got too many plans, Luke and me."

"I don't like him."

"I know. You don't have to tell me. I don't want to hear about it."

"He's a crooked tin horn who took the boys' money when he worked out here. Quong saw him and told me."

He grunted contemptuously. "Then why didn't he say something about it?"

"Because Luke was packing a gun, that's why. None of the other boys were. If Quong and me had said anything, Wes would have crawled him and got killed. So I just let things ride, figuring the boys weren't babies. But there's a score to be settled there and it's going to be settled. That's flat, Dad."

"Now look here, Jim," he said coldly. "I just said that trouble would spoil our plans. That means you as well as Wes."

I was getting pretty angry, my gorge rising. And I wasn't afraid of him any longer. I hadn't been in a long time.

He was two inches shorter than me now and twenty pounds lighter.

"I know all about those plans," I told him. "They mean us fellows working our insides out on this ranch while he—"

"Just one thing more we'd better get straight, Jim," he cut in icily, tossing the bridle across the saddle. "My business is my own and it still means this ranch. Luke is my friend and I'll bring him on this place anytime I get the notion. You put that back in your head and don't ever forget it. And now let's drop it and not mention the matter again."

We went out into the corral, toward the gate, both striding angrily. I was mad clean through to think how easily Luke was pulling the wool over his eyes. That was, I thought, what liquor could do to a good man.

So I was about ready to have it out with him and go pack my war bag except that about then, from up on the slope west of the house, came high-pitched, toneless singing, unmusical and just a wee bit sing-song. I looked up and pointed.

Quong, astride Susie without saddle or bridle, was loping her down across the west slope of the basin toward the corral.

CHAPTER XVI

QUONG had got the very original idea in mind that he could catch himself a full grown live coyote . . . though just what he figured to do with it afterward hadn't been made clear to the rest of us. So, after work evenings, he had collected gunny sacks, mattox and shovel and gone up on the hill back of the house to dig himself a coyote trap.

He was cagey about it, remembering our experience with the poison lard pills. He put turpentine on his boots and knees and used gloves in order not to leave any man scent behind. He had dug the pit, methodically putting each shovel full of dirt in the sacks and carrying it over about a hundred yards distance and scattering it around, so that the coyotes wouldn't get suspicious about what was up.

He had finished the pit in about a week, making it good and deep to prevent the captive coyote from climbing out, sloping the sides in as he went down and thus making the bottom a lot bigger than the top. He'd carefully managed to camouflage it with light twigs and grass, placing a sizeable chunk of fresh meat directly in the center.

The coyote theoretically would come loping along, spot the beef, pounce on it, and—kablooey! Quong would have

himself a pet coyote.

He had gone up the first morning, Slim and I riding along to help him lasso the captive coyote. He'd tried to act casual, but it was easy to see that he was pretty excited when we approached the hole. He sure enough thought he would have himself a coyote—or maybe even two, if they'd been loping along together and spotted the meat at the same time.

So, with Quong plodding along on foot, the three of us had gone up to the "trap" where, looking very foolish, a big husky blaze faced heifer stood poking its head up over the top and bawling its misery. We got our ropes on the grunting animal and hauled it out all right—whereupon it promptly showed its appreciation by going on the prod. It ran at Quong, bowled him over, and then went loping and snorting disgustedly off down to join its brethren in the basin.

Slim and I never did tell Quong that we had slipped up there the night before and roped that yearling and dragged it into the hole. He was still trying to catch himself a coyote.

So, that afternoon, he had gone up to check the "trap" for the night and Susie had followed. He'd caught her up there, climbed aboard, and was now loping back singing at the top of his lungs. Dad and I, our quarrel forgotten, leaned our arms on the corral gate and watched, though his eyes were mostly on the mule.

She was as long legged as a big gelding and he sat her like a man in a rocking chair as she rocked along at a lope, ears straight up and tail switching. She hadn't made a buck the first time he rode her bareback, nor had she, to my inner disappointment, minded the second belly band on Quong's double rigged saddle.

They made a beautiful pair. He was hatless but still wore one of his black silk shirts. Summer and winter he wouldn't wear anything else.

"There comes as fine a man as I ever expect to know," I said to Dad. "A strange man in many ways. I never told you before, Dad, but Quong has no memory of his past life before he came to the ranch that day with the bandage around his head. It's all a blank. But you wouldn't think so to watch him. He's contented as any man can be, though sometimes I get the idea he feels that he was sent here for some strange reason."

IT WAS as near as I ever came to telling Dad about Quong's belief that he had been born and lived two thousand years before. And I knew from little things he had said, hints unconsciously dropped, that he had known Lenore, or somebody like Lenore, back in the past.

Dad didn't seem to be much interested. His eyes were still on Susie.

"That's as nice a piece of mule flesh as I ever saw," he commented. "I could get a good chunk of money for her. A hundred and twenty-five, at least."

"She really belongs to Quong, you know," I reminded him. "Don't forget that you wanted to have her knocked in the head with an ax. It would break Quong's heart if you sold her off."

"I might have to," he countered.

That sent my gorge on the rise again, I began to get hot inside. "On the day you sell that mule there's going to be real trouble between us. We ain't much of a family anymore, what with Lenore gone and you living in town. I've about given up hope that we'll ever get back together again. So it wouldn't take too much for me to pack up and let you and Luke have this ranch."

"All right, all right," he grunted impatiently. "I won't sell her off."

"I hope not. He's been riding her

only a few weeks and I never saw an animal take to handling cattle like she did. She's fast as lightning on her feet and already knows enough to follow a rope and watch it. Quong can bust any cow on the place with her."

"That reminds me, Jim . . ." and he hesitated just a bit.

I felt something coming. He didn't hesitate on matters concerning the ranch.

"Joe Hodge will be over in a day or so to look at about fifty head of the stockers. Let him take his pick. He's bringing along three of his men to haze them home. I'll pick up the money at the bank in Hoogan."

"But . . . Dad, we've got less than two hundred head left now. That will only give us a hundred and forty head left, by actual count. We need those cattle badly. Do we *have* to sell?"

He let go a half tired, half impatient sigh. "I'm afraid so. After all, son," he said defensively, "I've got to have money to get set on some of the deals Luke and me have in mind, including my buying a half interest in his store one of these days. I can take the money and make a better margin of profit than we've got here grazing on the hoof. Besides, I owe Luke a pretty big bill at the store for clothes and such."

I started to cut loose on him in earnest, but he wasn't looking at me while he spoke. I don't think he had the nerve. He was watching Quong rounding the corner of the corral astride the loping Susie.

"In that case," I said slowly, "I'll let all the hands go this week-end. You pay them off in town. I'll tell them that you're going to pay them off. Slim and Wes and Quong and me can run the place."

"Why don't you let that Chinese go?" he grunted. "Even Luke has been saying that people in town are laughing behind our backs on account of him hanging around here and coming in town with you to dances and such, dressed up like a good American cow hand."

"Quong stays, to the last," I said firmly. "I'll let Slim and Wes go before I fire Quong. He's my friend, and he's more of a man than yours—meaning Luke Osborn, the cheap crooked tin horn."

We'd have started another clash right then over Luke if Quong hadn't come up to the gate. He slid off and opened it. He aimed a kick that missed Susie's rump by two feet and said, "Get inside to your stall, you slab-sided, wall-eyed pirute!"

Slab-sided, wall-eyed pirute. He had picked that one up from Slim.

HE CAME over across the lot, walking with his peculiar short-legged stride, and grinned. "Hello, Mr. Devers. How's things going?"

Two years now. It was a different Quong from the one who had stood before Dad that day in front of that same corral gate, cap in his hands, pleading for Susie's life. Two years . . . the Devers three had been a family then . . .

Dad had supper with Quong and me that night and while Quong did the dishes we sat out on the front porch and talked a little. We didn't say much. It might have led to another quarrel. I sat there in the chair with my feet on the balustrade, looking out over the basin to the lights of Montrose two and a half miles away and thinking vague thoughts; mostly about mother and how Lenore and me played around the ranch when we were kids. Dad smoked in silence a lot of the time. About nine thirty he pinched out his cigarette and rose.

"Well, I guess I'll turn in. See you in the morning, Jim."

"Right," I said and got up too.

I went down to the bunk house and told the three hands we had left about the sale of the stock and that Dad would pay them off in town that weekend. Wes didn't say much when I informed him of Hal Rogers' death that afternoon. He said, "Too bad," and I wondered if he realized that he might now be in a position to step into business for himself and take a pretty wife at the same time. I didn't know how Ruth felt about him, but he was good looking in a small, wiry way and he always had a way with the girls. When Wes wanted to he could make anybody like him.

"I sure do hate to hear that," Slim commented softly. "Miz Rogers is one of the sweetest women I ever knew. Reminds me a lot of my own mother I didn't write to in about four years, though Lenore and me—I did visit with her awhile down in Texas when I was down that way last time."

Wes rose to his feet, not saying anything, and hung upon a nail the partly finished horse hair headstall he'd been plaiting. It was the same nail where old Harley's guns had hung for so long. The guns weren't up there now. They still were in Wes's war bag, oiled and loaded.

We got up early the next morning and I milked the one cow before breakfast while Quong worked over the stove. It didn't seem to be drawing just right and he was cussing it in Chinese. After breakfast Wes and I hooked up a team to the light wagon, Slim was going to wait and ride in a little later, with Quong. I got digging tools and a long post hole crowbar out of the shed and put them in the wagon. Dad came out and saddled up his horse. He went on ahead and Wes and me followed in the wagon.

"The old man don't stick around the ranch much anymore, does he?" Wes finally commented, after a half mile of silence between us.

I shrugged. "I guess he's doing what he wants to do, Wes. Quong probably could quote some kind of Chinese proverb to cover it, but the way I look at it a man has to work out things in his own way."

HE LOOKED at me queerly, then let his hard flecked eyes go off over the bobbing rumps of the ponies into the distance. "You sure hit the nail on the head that time, Jim. A man sure does, I reckon. He works it out according to his *own* way of thinking."

"He was going to pieces pretty fast as it was, but Lenore running away with Slim after more or less causing that quarrel and shooting between you and Joe Docker sort of helped to grease the sled runners, I reckon."

"She didn't have anything to do with it," he got out harshly. "I got a long memory and I hadn't forgot that fight we had when I caught him ruffing the edge of an ace with his thumb so's to mark it. I would have got him anyhow. That dance just happened to fit in. Lenore's all right." Again that harsh note in his voice. "I don't give a damn what you or Ed or anybody else says. Lenore's all right."

"Okay, have it your way. But you better look closer to home, Wes," I said bluntly. "I've been hearing reports that Luke has started stabling his two blooded horses at the Rogers livery for more reasons than one—and I've got eyes too. I saw plenty at the last couple of dances. She didn't tell you that he's trying to have dates with her, did she? No, Ruth wouldn't. She's afraid you'll go on the rampage again some night when you're drunk and throw a gun on Luke and go back to the pen, this time for ninety-nine years."

"Yeah?"

"I'm just telling you that, Wes, no matter how much of a sore head you've got on about Lenore not waiting for you. It's the best break you ever got. Ruth has got more real woman in her than a dozen Lenores—and you can like it or lump it, I don't care which. And, speaking of Luke Osborn, Dad says he don't want any trouble with anybody, particularly you, Wes. As far as that fight in Andy's is concerned, he's gotten over it—it's been forgotten. It ain't because he loves you. It's because his and Dad's plans for being big businessmen in town don't call for any gun fighting. So why don't you lay off and open your eyes? You can, if you play your cards right, move into that big house of Hal's, take over the livery for Ruth and Mildred, and soon forget all about the past year."

I rushed through the last of it pretty fast, certain that he was going to interrupt and tell me to mind my own affairs. But to my surprise he didn't. He sat there while the span, now walking, covered a hundred yards. The trace chains rattled idly. Then his voice came, almost softly.

"You might have something there at that, Jim."

"Then it's okay about Luke? You won't go getting full of red-eye some night and throw one of old Harley's guns that you've got hidden down in your warbag?"

He didn't answer for a few moments, smoking thoughtfully. Then he flicked away the butt, out over the front wheel.

"You might have something there at that, Jim," he repeated, softly.

CHAPTER VXII

WE GOT in town about nine thirty and I drove over to the hotel to find Dad. He wasn't in, the clerk saying Luke and him were over at the Rogers home. I jogged the team across town and pulled up in front of the picket fence around the big front yard. Dad's horse was there and so was one of Luke's satin sleek bays. He had come a long ways since he'd punched for us and got up winter mornings to chop ice out of the horse trough in the corral. Wes and I got down and went inside, removing our big hats.

Hal already was in the coffin, the blue satin covered pine box resting on two chairs in the front room. Two neighbor women sat beside it.

Luke stood by the kitchen door, blond hair carefully combed over the ears in gentle waves. His corn silk mustache was carefully trimmed along the lower edge, the long ends drooping. He nodded a friendly greeting to the both of us.

"Where's Dad?" I asked shortly.

"In the kitchen talking with Mrs. Rogers. There they are."

Dad came out with Mildred. She was in her middle forties and it was pretty easy to see where Ruth had got her clean womanliness and wholesome beauty.

"Morning, Mildred," I said, awkwardly. "I'm sure sorry about Hal."

"Thank you, Jim," she smiled. "I'm sure he'll understand. Ruth is upstairs. She'll be down in a minute. Did you want to see her?"

"Well . . . well, sure, Mildred," I said. "Wes and me both."

She was putting on her wide brimmed woman's hat. "Jim," Dad said, "we're going out to the cemetery in the wagon to pick a spot to put Hal away. You come on out on my horse. Some of the men from town will be out with Andy pretty soon to give you a hand. You want to ride out with us in the wagon, Wes?"

"I'll stick around and see Ruth for a

minute," Wes said carelessly, and there was just a barely perceptible fleck in his eyes as he glanced at Luke. He was telling Luke that he wasn't needed at the house anymore and better not stick around.

"I'll catch a ride out in a little while," Wes added.

I put on my hat and followed Dad and Mrs. Rogers with Luke trailing along. I mounted Dad's horse and Luke swung up as the wagon with Dad and Mrs. Rogers in it trotted off. I reined the bay around and followed at a walk.

Then I noticed Luke beside me, riding almost knee to knee.

"I'd sorta like to talk to you, kid," he said.

I let that one go by. He flicked the ends of his reins against the saddle horn, idly, hands encased in expensive gloves. "Why can't I be friends with you, Jim?" he finally asked.

I started laughing; bitter laughter that was gall in my throat. "I've heard everything now!"

"Why?" he insisted.

"Why? Okay, Luke, I'll let you have it straight from the shoulder. Because you're a crooked tin horn card sharp. You and Joe used marked cards and signals out at the ranch to clean the boys of about seven hundred dollars of hard earned wages. I didn't say anything about it. I figured the boys ain't babies —they can take care of themselves. I also knew you were packing a gun and that Wes wasn't. If Wes had found out about it, hothead that he is, he'd have climbed your frame without a gun and there'd have been a killing in the bunkhouse. You want me to go on?" I demanded.

"Why, sure, Jim. There never was a gambling man ever lived who didn't have these charges made against him, no matter how square he was. Go on."

"Okay, I'll go on. You're bleeding Dad dry. You've took him for God knows how many thousand dollars. I'm working sometimes up to sixteen hours a day in busy seasons, knowing where it all goes. Everytime I go out in a blinding snowstorm to haul feed for the cows I know I'm paying the money to Luke Osborn sitting in a warm room in town. You've got Dad just about where you want him. He actually believes you're his friend. And all the time you're squeezing the guts out of the Devers ranch."

HE LOOKED hurt; almost shocked. "Why, Jim—hell, kid, that's not true. Your Dad wins every now and then. He took fifteen hundred off me in one night and then blew it in at Billie's. He won twenty-five hundred that night. Billie got it all."

"Billie got about four hundred of it in three nights, all for drinks he bought for everybody who came in. You got the rest of it—twenty-one hundred. You got back the fifteen hundred you deliberately let him win and six hundred more."

I think I really rocked him back on his heels. Innerly he must have been stunned at how much I knew. His face had changed color just a shade.

"And all the time," I went on, "he's swallowing these stories of yours about 'big plans.' Sure, Luke, you got big plans—and those plans don't include anybody but Luke Osborn."

"Kid, you sure got me all wrong," he argued. "It really hurts me to have you think things like this. Somebody's been feeding you opium. Maybe that slant-eyed Chink I never had much use for. But your Dad and me are just about set on this cattle buying deal."

"He's all set on a cattle 'selling' deal, in case you don't already know it," I snapped. "Fifty more head over your

card table."

"Kid, you sure got me all wrong," he repeated, almost sadly. "I like your Dad and am trying to help him get back on his feet. I always liked you and your sister. I've been even hoping maybe she'd come back here someday and you could all get together in a family again. Your Dad wants it too. It would be mighty fine if she did and I could come out on these big deals, with you as foreman and running this end of the thing for us."

"You'd better hope she don't come back, as long as Wes Allen is around," I told him bluntly. "You saw what happened to Joe when he played up to her. It'll happen to you too, no matter if she is Slim's wife. If Wes ever catches you even looking at her, he'll send you right in to hell on the heels of Joe Docker."

He grinned a little thinly at that one; meaningly. "Will he now, kid? I'll lay you odds that within a month Wes is engaged to Ruth and won't care whether I speak to your sister or not."

I reined up and looked at him coldly, killing rage coming up. I was about ready to throw myself over onto his horse and bust that prosperous, immaculate look off his face. "I think you better go back to town, Luke. I think too much of Hal Rogers' family to do to you today what it looks like I'll have to do someday."

He shrugged and reined away and I rode on out to the cemetery a quarter of a mile north of town. It lay on a flat stretch of country, studded with small pine and fir. There wasn't any fence around it as yet, though somebody in town, with loved ones buried there, had taken rocks and concrete and built square stanchions three feet thick and eight feet high that someday would support an arched entrance. The wagon was there and I swung down from Dad's horse and walked over among the stones and headboards. One headboard had the name of Joe Docker on it. Grass was beginning to grow over his grave and a mound of fresh gopher dirt was mushroomed out near Joe's booted feet. *Out of the way, cowboy! I'm a businessman now, ha, ha!*

I WALKED about forty steps over and took off my hat before a white stone six feet high, shaped into a tree trunk. A flat, glazed section of it bore mother's name and dates, with the words, *She was a good wife and loving mother.* Dad had had them put that on there.

"Mom," I said, speaking softly so Dad and Mrs. Rogers wouldn't hear me, the brim of my hat clenched tight until the nails hurt. "I know I ain't doing exactly right, what with drinking and going down to Billie's every now and then. But you got to help me. We ain't a family anymore. Dad's gone to pieces and it won't be too long until I got to put him here beside you, I'm thinking. Lenore's gone. And I think I've got to kill Luke Osborn one of these days. You got to help me, Mom. If you can, try to get Lenore back and try to help us get together again. Try to keep me from killing Luke, because you never wanted me to pack a gun. . . ."

I got all choked up and couldn't talk anymore. I took out my bandana and blew hard, wiping at my nose and then making sure with one corner of it that my eyes wouldn't be a little damp when I met Dad and Mrs. Rogers. I walked over.

Mildred Rogers was indicating a spot on the ground, close by a pine sapling. "I'd like to have him buried here, Mr. Devers," she said to Dad. "I want his head up close by that big pine so that in years to come the branches will spread over his grave. Hal loved the

outdoors, Mr. Devers. He always hoped that someday we could get out on a small ranch. He couldn't understand why anybody would want to live in town unless they had to."

"All right, Mrs. Rogers," Dad said kindly. "That's where we'll dig the grave. Hal was really a fine man. Did you bring up the tools from the wagon, son?"

I told him I'd forgotten them.

"Well, here's where Mrs. Rogers wants Hal buried. You start in and we'll go on back. The men from town will be up pretty soon to give you a hand. Andy is bringing them up."

We got the grave finished about one o'clock with the dirt piled in two ridged rows on both sides, though Wes Allen didn't show up. He was down at the house with Ruth, who was taking it pretty hard. When the minister read the burial service that afternoon Wes stood with his hat off, blond hair in the wind, an arm around Ruth's waist. She was sobbing quietly and holding to him for support. He looked strong—strong and tawny, like a young puma, but he didn't have that hard look on his face that had been present the day she drove him out to the ranch, when he came home from the pen. I thought of Joe Docker's grave over about forty steps away and how Wes had shot him down that night in front of the school house. I thought of the old 44-40's that Harley had used in his sheriffing days, now in Wes's warbag, oiled and loaded.

Luke was there too, off by himself. The breeze put faint riffles in his carefully combed blond hair as he stood, hat in hand.

We all filed by Hal's coffin for a last look at him and then closed it and used a couple of lariats to lower it into the hole. I jumped down and nailed on the lid of the outer box of raw pine and we started shoveling in clods and dirt from both sides. People began drifting away.

Dust unto dust, the minister had said . . . *back to the earth from which he came, back to the earth which gave him life* . . .

Luke went back to town with Dad and Mildred Rogers. Andy and some of the other fellows, Quong, Slim, and myself finished heaping up the loose dirt that one day would settle level again. I put up the headboard with Hal's name and dates branded into it. Wes had gone back with Ruth and I drove in town alone, Quong jogging at the left front wheel astride Susie. We pulled up in front of Andy's place and Quong reined in the mule. He was riding his double rigged saddle and Susie didn't seem to mind in the least about the double belly band. She was the darndest saddle mule you ever saw and Quong was tickled pink, because she'd turned into a cutting mule.

Not one cow pony in a hundred ever has what it takes to make a natural cutting horse. You could take almost any knot head and teach him to follow a steer and watch for the rope to settle and then brace himself for the shock of a thousand pounds of live beef hitting the end of a forty foot lariat. But when it comes to cutting, the average horse never had what it takes.

Susie had it.

I had watched her, with Quong up in the saddle, find out just what critter he wanted separated from the others, and from then on he'd never have to touch a rein. She'd work that critter alone, swinging so sharply when it tried to break back into the main herd that the stirrups appeared almost to be touching the ground.

She was one in a hundred; and in the couple of months since he'd been fooling around with her, listening carefully to Slim's advice, even some of the cow-

men began to talk about Susie.

Luke Osborn was on the porch with Andy when Quong rode up; and Luke Osborn's eyes glinted just a little when he looked at Susie and then at Quong's face. Some men just naturally take a dislike to others at sight, and, for some strange reason, Luke had always hated Quong.

"I like the looks of that mule," I heard him remark to Andy. "I think I'll make Ed sell her to me."

CHAPTER XVIII

JOE HODGE came over one morning a couple of days later with three of his men to pick up the fifty head of cows he had bought from Dad. His ranch lay several miles north of our spread. I was at the corral, getting ready to saddle up, when the four of them jogged past the veranda and pulled up at the kitchen door, Joe puffing complacently on his corn cob pipe.

Quong came to the doorway of the kitchen. He wasn't quite finished with cleaning up the house.

"Morning, Mr. Hodge," he called. "Get down and come in."

"Ain't got much time," I heard Joe say. "Got to get them cows started back as soon as we cut 'em out."

"Hey, Joe," I hollered. "Go on in and have some coffee. I'll be down in a minute as soon as I finish saddling."

They swung down and went into the kitchen. It was pretty much of a bachelor place anyhow by now. Wes and Slim came out of the barn with their ropes and, presently, we led our mounts over to the ranch house. Slim was to go on south, working the range by himself, mostly pushing back the few head that strayed. In between he extended the fence.

There was still a lot of open range in Montana, so it was pretty natural that most cowmen hated a fence like poison, particularly Joe. He couldn't stomach the sight of barbed wire. It was true that cattle sometimes got cut up pretty badly when, backs humped up against the driving snow and sleet, they drifted up against wire and the other cattle pressed in.

But Dad didn't care. He knew that the old open, free range would, in time, come to an end. He had title to every foot of land encompassing the ranch. His idea was to get it all under good fence and work a small, neat spread. Dad had never got any big ideas about being a cattle baron. He wanted just what we had had: up to five hundred head that, once under fence, could easily be handled.

We'd just about had them too, until mother died and Lenore ran away and Luke Osborn came in.

"What's Slim doing these days?" Joe asked as we all jogged out into the basin.

"Down on the south range building fence and taking care of the strays," I said.

"He's a good old boy, Slim is," Joe grinned, middle aged, easy going, and prosperous. "I sure like to watch that cow hand at a dance. He's really something on the floor. But . . . building fence! That's a hell of a job for a good cow hand like Slim. He ought to come over to our place and start *punching* cows again instead of doing nester work."

"You're just like all these old time cowmen, Joe," I said. "You think free range is going to be here always. You better start getting title to all that land of yours and get it under fence. You'll find out someday it's a good investment."

JOE giggled; he had the darndest giggle you ever heard. It seemed to come

right up out of the rolls of fat around his chin and belly. He puffed away on his corn cob pipe and giggled, rocking in the saddle.

"You're sure old Ed's boy, all right," he said, between puffs on the corn cob. "Cautious as all get out, Ed was." I noticed he said *was*. We rode out among the grazing cattle.

A few lifted their heads from feeding and then trotted off, horns high and stopping every now and then to look back, a scared expression in their white faces.

"How much are you paying Dad for these fifty head?" I asked Joe.

"Thirty-five a head, Jim. Ed said most of them were with calf and that I could take my pick. But I'll play fair with you. I'll pick a young one with her first calf and then you pick an old one, also with calf. That's a fair bargain, Jim."

"Fair enough," I agreed.

Joe picked the first one; a three year old. He nodded to one of his riders, Mel Perritt. "Cut her out, Mel, and start her toward the north gate of that damned fence of Ed's. You better go with him, Buster, and help hold 'em while we haze 'em out."

Mel Perritt gigged into the herd and started edging the heifer out, the other two Hodge men loping in to give him a hand. I watched the scared cow go, a little sick in my stomach. It hadn't been too many months back since Dad had sold off his shippers, intending to use the money to catch some cowman short of feed and buy the extra stuff the man couldn't hold. But things were reversed now; we were *selling*. Not because of a shortage of feed but because Dad needed more money to sit in on games getting bigger and bigger in Luke Osborn's domino parlor.

I picked the second critter; a part brindle cow that had thrown five dead calves in six years. Every year since I could remember first seeing her Dad had sworn that he would fatten her up and ship her to the packing house. He never had.

Joe's eyes followed the angrily trotting brindle while he reached for a match, striking it on the saddle horn and relighting the dead corn cob pipe. It was a joke among Joe's friends that he slept with the corn cob between his teeth. "We'll probably have to pole her up all winter," he giggled, puffing away.

The cut-outs grew and Joe's three riders had their hands full holding them while we continued selecting more critters. The stockers didn't want to be separated. Joe finally chose a young heifer that was as wild and fleet of foot as an antelope and Quong went in after her on Susie. And that morning there on our ranch I witnessed an exhibition of cutting out of a kind I'd never believed could happen. Quong had got her started out, but she was a cagey she-devil. She broke straight for the center of the herd, heading south in the opposite direction.

Susie went in after her at a dead run. They busted that herd of grazing cows wide open, but Susie's mule eyes never left the streaking heifer. They went through the herd, wheeled over east of it, and strung out, just the two of them, at a hoof drumming run. Quong rode high in the stirrups, his short, black shirted torso bent forward a little, and he wasn't working his spurless heels into her sides. He wouldn't wear spurs when he rode Susie.

He didn't need them, for Susie was right after the plunging heifer, her nose almost on top of its rump. It broke in a darting turn, trying to get back among the others, and Susie wheeled, reins lying idle on her neck, and cut her off.

Joe Hodge was standing up in the

stirrups, his pipe forgotten, clenched hard between his fingers. His easy going eyes, almost buried in rolls of fat, were snapping excitedly. We were alone, Wes having gone in after another cow I'd indicated.

JOE wheeled on me, twisting his fat, leather hardened body at the middle. "My God, Jim, where'd you get that mule? I've been hearing about her."

I shrugged carelessly, trying to appear nonchalant. "She belongs to the ranch, I guess. Quong raised her on a bottle. He even feeds her raw eggs. Maybe that's where she gets her wind."

"Wind?"

"Susie could run down and kill on its feet any horse on this ranch, Joe," I said. "If I ever have to go a long way fast, I'm going to ask Quong for Susie. I've never seen her equal."

"Neither have I, Jim, and I'll give you two hundred cash for her right this morning."

"Not a chance."

"I've got to have that mule, Jim. If Ed will part with her I'll add an even three hundred in cash to the sale price of these fifty head."

"If you want to do me a favor," I said, "forget that mule. Luke Osborn wants her too, but if Dad sold her it would break Quong's heart. He worships that blasted animal. I've seen him get up in the middle of a howling winter night and go out to the barn just to make sure she was warm and comfortable. He could, of course, buy her for himself, but maybe that might change things. I dunno, Joe. All I know is that she follows him around like a pet pup. She'd come right into the kitchen if he'd let her. So as a personal favor to me, Joe, don't say anything to Dad about buying Susie. This ranch just wouldn't be the same without her and Quong."

"All right, old timer. I didn't know. Sure, kid, we'll forget it."

Joe Hodge. Fat Joe with his corn cob pipe and his giggle. I was to go to his funeral one day, and I was to remember what a grand man Joe had been. They didn't come better.

We got the fifty head cut out, Wes loping ahead to the north gate to recount as they went through. Joe waved goodbye and we jogged back to the ranch.

"What do you want me to do this afternoon, Jim?" Wes asked.

I sensed the hint in his voice. I told him there wasn't much of anything special, and he asked for the afternoon off. He loped off toward town to see Ruth Rogers. Three weeks later he told me that Ruth and him were going to get married that fall.

Slim Holcomb was tickled pink when he got the announcement. He had been Wes's close friend a long time ago. They borrowed money off each other, stole clean shirts out of each other's warbags to wear to dances, gibed and played tricks on each other. But Wes's going to prison and return, with the knowledge that Slim had married his girl, had thrown up a barrier between them. They still, outwardly, were good friends working for the same outfit; but underneath it all I sensed a certain strained feeling that was hard to define.

Wes's engagement to Ruth Rogers changed all this. He had forgotten Lenore now and was filled with plans for expanding the livery stable and putting in a general feed store to boot. He'd live in town and all of us could come in and visit.

It got to be almost like old times on the ranch. Wes went whistling about the ranch and he wouldn't take a drink in town. He went in almost every night now to see Ruth. Slim stayed at the

bunkhouse—only the two of them sharing it now—and seemed happy. He had brightened up a lot.

"I always liked old Wes," he grinned to me one day. "He just got off to a bad start. I was plenty worried, Jim, when he came home from the pen all tight inside and not talking much. I can just about figger out how he felt. But, boy, how he has changed! He laughs all the time now, Jim."

"Well . . . sure, he does," I admitted.

I wasn't quite convinced. Not until the day I went down to the bunkhouse and happened to glance up on the wall. Old Harley's guns were back in place now. Wes had taken them out of his warbag and hung them back up where they'd always hung. I knew then that Wes's loving Ruth had made a new man out of him.

When cold weather hit us that fall Dad and Luke Osborn pulled the first one of their "big deals." They drove twenty-five head of stockers onto the ranch, bought from Ike McCauley. I turned sick all over as Wes and me helped Dad and Luke drive them through the north gate.

NOT a one of them was under ten years old. Their hip bones stood out like bone lumps and their necks looked like rope strings. Ike was a wise cowman. He had known that if they remained on his ranch they'd eat up feed and put on no meat. Half of them would get down, their aged legs getting stiff and unable to get them back on their feet again.

I knew what Wes and Slim and Quong and I were in for. We'd have to go out each day and look for the ones that were down. We'd feed them good grain and even carry water for them and put it in front of their noses. Some would manage to get to their feet. Others would stay there, unable to get up, until we ran a pole under their chests and got two men on the ends. Another would get hold of a tail. The three of us would tail the cow up on her feet so that she could stay up all day and gulp down good feed raised for younger stock. Stock that would grow and put on fat and produce more young.

There had been a time when Dad wouldn't have let twenty-five head of such broken down stuff set foot on the place. He'd have let go a roar and tried to whip the cowman who offered them for sale. Now he rode over and reined in his horse beside mine, chuckling.

"Where'd you get the money to buy this stuff, Dad?" I asked.

He shot me a glance, something coyly triumphant in it. "Won it playing poker, Jim. Ike thought he was putting a fast one over on me, betting me these cows against a straight flush. Joe Hodge was in the game too. Joe'll probably never get it through his head that he actually was paying for these cows. Money he lost and *I* won. Joe actually paid about sixty a head for those stockers he bought a few weeks ago. We're on our way now, son. This is just the beginning. You just watch things roll from now on."

Luke rode over. Dad had loped off to see Wes, telling him about how the new stockers ought to be handled. "Hello, Jim," Luke said.

"So you're a big cowman now?" I asked sarcastically.

He was still immaculately dressed, even to the gloves. "This is just the beginning, Jim. Ed and me have more plans. You want to pay me off that bet?"

"Bet?" blankly.

"I told you the day we buried Hal Rogers that Wes would get together in no time with Ruth. It's happened. But

I won't try to collect. I'm your friend, Jim. You stick with Ed and me and someday you'll be foreman of the biggest outfit in Montana. We haven't even *started* yet. This bunch is just a beginning."

"This bunch," I said coolly, "is just the beginning of a damned hard lot of work for Slim and Quong and me this winter. You're a cow hand at heart, Luke—in spite of your clothes and the way you put on airs. You know that these twenty-five head aren't worth the feed they'll eat this winter . . . not to mention me and Slim and Quong having to pole half of them up every morning. Don't get me wrong, Luke. I'm willing to do the work if it will make Dad happy. He thinks you're his friend. His head is all filled with big, new ideas. So it's okay with me, if Dad is happy. You don't have to worry about the cows. We'll take care of them the best we can this winter—though you know without my telling you that before spring we'll have to skin half of them to get three dollars apiece for the hides. You ain't fooling me in the least, Luke. I just want you to know where we stand."

HE SHOOK his head in that sad way he had cultivated toward me. "Kid, you sure got me all wrong. Just because I won a few dollars off the boys at the ranch a couple of years ago, you think I'm a no good sonuvabitch. I'm not, kid. This country is big; it's big enough for all of us. And, though you'll never believe it, I'm the one man in town who wants to se the Devers spread get back on its feet and expand. I'm older than you are, kid. A lot older. I know what you feel and think. I know that above all else you want to get your family back together again—and God knows I'm willing to help. I'm hoping for the day when your sister will come back and make your dad happy once more. By the way, have you heard from her lately? I was always fond of Lenore, you know?"

I was about to tell him that one more word about my sister and I'd crawl him, except that Quong came loping over on Susie. He reined up and grinned at me.

"We got our work cut out for us this winter, Jim," he said. "Of all the busted down bunch of cows I ever saw, those out there are the worst. I can't imagine why your father ever bought them."

"Why, Quong, for shame!" I said, mockingly. "I thought that with the Chinese good manners always came first. And here you are making rude remarks like that right in front of Luke, who owns half of them. I'm very much disappointed in you, Quong."

Luke grinned a sour grin, but his eyes were on Susie. Quong curried her blue coat daily without fail and she was as sleek as Luke's own blooded saddle mount. Her hide shone.

"That's all right, kid," Luke Osborn said to me. "I know how you feel. But you'll feel differently one of these days when Ed and I really get going. We'll have this basin so full of good stuff you won't be able to thread a horse through them. You wait and see."

We all rode back to the ranch where Quong cooked dinner for us. He fixed up some steaks and pulled a few vegetables out of the garden back of the house. After dinner was over Dad and Luke set off for town together.

I didn't see Dad for nearly two weeks. We were busy getting in the last of the hay, working from daylight until dark. Slim stuck to the bunkhouse nights, though Wes would get up mornings so tired and sleepy he hardly could keep awake. He seldom got back from Ruth's house in Montrose before midnight each night. The old cows were eating their stringy heads off and

I was hoping they could put on a little meat before winter, because they were going to need it.

Then one afternoon, after the hay was up and things slacked off somewhat, I came in early and happened to look out across the basin. A rig was coming and I recognized Dad's figure driving. Luke was with him too. Dad drove up to the ranch house and saw me. He called out, "Hey, son, now just look who's sitting here between me and Luke, will you!"

It was Lenore.

CHAPTER XIX

I PUT down the coffee cup and descended the eight front steps of the big veranda, somehow feeling a little strange in front of this new Lenore, who had been away for so long. I hadn't had time to shave in nearly a week, and my whiskers were at that stage when they were neither sandy colored stubble nor fuzz. My old corduroy pants were threadbare and faded, my boots run down, the heavy spurs with big dull rowels bright from hard use.

Dad was wrapping the lines around the brake handle. He stepped down off the front wheel hub and shoved back his hat, grinning expectantly. It was plain that he was all excited about my sister coming back. Luke dropped off the other wheel and stood there while Dad reached up and took Lenore under the armpits. He swung her lightly to the ground.

"Well, kitten, you're home again," he said.

"She sure is, Ed, and I'm as happy about it as you and Jim are," Luke Osborn grinned.

He was looking at Lenore, devouring her with his eyes, and I felt, with rising anger, that it wouldn't be long until Luke and I tangled. I thought about Slim, down on the south range, going to church Sundays while he ate his heart out for Lenore. Maybe, I thought, things would be a lot better now. We just might become a family again. I looked at my sister.

She wore a brown suit of some heavy material that shone like satin, with a big fur headpiece something on the order of Russian Cossacks whose pictures I'd seen, her hands encased in a big muff of beaver fur. Dad released her and she ran up to the front steps, grabbing me in her arms and hugging and kissing me, smelling of an exotic perfume.

"Oh, Jim, Jim, Jim!" she cried out, squeezing me tight and smothering me with more kisses I didn't mind. Not anymore.

She stepped back and looked up, unable to believe her eyes at how I'd grown. "Holy cow!" she gasped out. "You . . . you *monster*, you! You're shooting up a foot every day. Why . . . you're a giant! How tall are you?"

"Six two," I said.

"Taller even than Dad. Oh, Jim, Jim, it's good to be back! I never realized how I've missed this old place."

Dad and Luke came up the steps, Luke with his hat off. He said, "Howdy, Jim," and tried to make it casual; but I could see his eyes were still mostly for Lenore. Dad got his arms around the both of us and looked at Luke, his eyes shining. "They're my two kids, Luke. One going on eighteen and one going on twenty. Seems it hasn't been five years ago since they were playing and fighting around this house. Time sure flies, doesn't it?"

"Seems like it was only yesterday since I was riding for you, Ed," Luke replied. "Remember the day you hired me in Andy Calders' place? Time works funny sometimes, I reckon."

"It sure does," Dad agreed wholeheartedly.

I GOT Lenore's two trunks out of the wagon and came up, one under each arm, my reach was that long now. I had to put one down to get the other through the door and into her old room. It hadn't been changed. Quong had gone in almost reverently once every three or four days and dusted and swept it. Only Dad's room he wouldn't touch. It was in shambles and rumpled, smelly blankets and the stale odor of smoke permeating it.

I put the trunk down and straightened. "I suppose Dad told you Wes is going to marry Ruth Rogers this fall?" I mentioned.

"Yes, he told me, Jim, and I'm glad. He told me all about Wes. Even Luke Osborn put in a good word for Wes. He really likes Wes."

"That's *damned* generous of him, Lenore," I said.

She smiled. "You don't like Luke, do you, Jim? He said on the way out that he'd give anything if he could just make friends with you. Why do you hate him?"

"Forget it," I shrugged and went out after her second trunk.

She had removed her fur headpiece and had the first trunk open. She looked different now. She'd been beautiful as a girl of seventeen, unmarried and virginal. This sister who came back was still more beautiful in a different way. Marriage to Slim had brought out full blown beauty. I thought again of Slim. I mentioned that he'd be in pretty soon from the south range.

"I'll be glad to see him," she said simply, and I didn't want to discuss the matter any further.

Lenore back at the ranch with Slim. Wes getting married to Ruth Rogers, Lenore's best friend. And Dad back at the ranch, happy over his pitifully few head of broken down stockers now grazing the range, but . . . back at the ranch. I felt like singing.

"Come on out and I'll show you around the place," I said.

"As if I didn't know my way around! Wait'll I change from this traveling dress. I just got in on the train this afternoon."

She began unbuttoning her bodice and I stepped outside in the hallway, rolling a cigarette and waiting. She came out in a neat white dress of the kind she'd once worn around the house and we went out back, through the kitchen door. Dad and Luke were in Dads room; having a drink, I suspected.

"Oh . . . my garden!" Lenore cried out, running out into it and squatting down by the green tops that soon would be doomed by the frost. "My garden. Don't tell me—I know. Quong did it."

"There's Susie," I said. "Remember how you named her that day, Lenore?"

"*Susie!*" she cried out and began working frantically at a carrot. She pulled it from the ground, dusted it, and started toward the blue mule. Susie gave her a langorous glance and then strolled off toward the corral. I busted out laughing, mostly at Lenore's crestfallen look.

"It's no use, Lenore. She's a one man mule. Now . . . if that had been Quong she'd have climbed that fence to get to him. She really loves that Chinese," I said.

Quong put in appearance about that time, astride one of the ranch ponies. He'd been over west of the ranch, in the timber, looking for a couple of heifers that had pushed their way through the fence.

He came loping down the slope from the direction of his now abandoned coyote "trap," singing like he always did when he rode in evenings. His black silk shirt was open at the front above the sagging bandana held in place by a ring from a dead cow's sawed off horn.

He saw Lenore and slammed dull steel to the bronc. They came ripping down past the corral at a dead run, the pony's belly low above the ground, the wind whipping off Quong's hat and letting it stand out behind, held by a leather thong around his throat.

"Kiyi!" he whooped and slid the bay cow pony to a stop on its haunches.

HE HIT the ground and came over to her, vaulting the low garden fence with a mile wide grin on his brown face. "Holy cow!" he said. "Miss Lenore."

"Quong! You old sonuvagun!" she cried out and threw both arms around him, hugging hard. "Why . . . you dog-goned Montana cowhand. You're a sight for sore eyes. And you kept my garden for me too, didn't you?"

"Well, Miss Lenore, I tried to," he admitted softly. "But we've been pretty busy running the ranch—Jim, Wes, Slim and myself. It's not much of a garden, I'm afraid."

"It's lovely. Oh . . . how good it is to be back."

Dad stuck his head out the kitchen door. "Quong," he bellowed.

"Yes, Mr. Devers," Quong said, turning, hat in hand.

"How about rustling up some grub? This is a family reunion. What have you got for supper?"

"What would you like, Mr. Devers?"

"What would I like?" Dad yelled, in high good humor, a little high from the drinks he and Luke had been having in his room. "What the devil do you think I'd like? Good Devers beef, that's what I'd like. Go over to the ice house and get some. I want a steak two inches thick with plenty of onions from that garden."

"I'll pull the onions, Quong, and peel the potatoes," Lenore said, happy like a kid. "You show me which ones to pull. I'll help you get supper. Where's the beef? Over in the ice house?"

I went straight over to the corral and to the stable where my saddle was in the old stall. I hooked fingers in the opening under the horn and carried it out into the corral, roping the lanky gelding Quong and I had emasculated that day Wes came home. He was a good cow pony now, Slim having broken him. His pride made him stand and snort a little when I slung up the saddle. but he carried me out across the basin where the lights of Montrose were beginning to gleam in the dusk. The days were short that fall.

I didn't go into Montrose. I cut over and made straight for the cemetery, swinging down close to the two stone and concrete stanchions that one day would support an arch. I threaded my way in among the head boards and stones and came to the white tree trunk, gleaming like a jewel in the night.

"Mom," I said, my hat off. "I knew you could get Lenore back. We're a family again, even though I ain't out with her and Dad at the ranch tonight. I couldn't have eaten a bite, knowing you weren't there and that Luke Osborn is in the house. I promise you now that I won't ever take another drink or go down to Billie's again. But the job ain't finished yet, Mom. Luke Osborn is looking at Lenore. If he tries to break up her and Slim I'll have to kill him, and I don't want to, Mom. You got to help me again. You got Lenore back but the job ain't finished yet. You got to help me keep Luke Osborn away from her."

I put on my hat and started out, and then a movement caught my eye. It was over toward Hal Rogers' grave. I strained my eyes and finally made out a woman's figure. She was down on her knees by Hal's grave and I was glad I'd spoken softly to Mom, because she

might have heard. Ruth Rogers' words came clearly.

"Dear God, watch over Hal and watch over Wes. One is dead, he's come to You. The other is alive and I'm going to marry him. Guide me right, dear God, and make me the kind of woman my father would have wanted me to be. Wes is so young and impetuous. Take the hardness and bitterness out of his heart. Lead him into the right paths. I know he's killed a man. I know he's broken one of Your commandments. But I know You'll understand why I'm marrying him. He needs help. He's lost. Dear God, forgive me my sins. . . ."

I JUST couldn't take any more of it. I felt like a thief; I felt like a mean, cheap low down thief, listening to Ruth Rogers pour out her young heart. I sneaked away, down past Joe Docker's grave, and carefully led the gelding for three hundred yards before I mounted him and walked him away into the night. Then I put steel into his sides and drove him at a run, out away from Montrose, out from the cemetery; fleeing with some kind of a strange terror in my heart. I spurred him hard; cruelly.

I almost killed that gelding getting back to the ranch that night.

They must have heard me coming across the basin, for I caught a sight of figures on the front porch when the gelding flashed past the house, his sides heaving and me laying the long ends of the reins on his rump, whipping him cruelly. He slid up on his haunches at the corral and somebody ran out; Wes. I swung down.

"Hey, kid, what the devil is the matter?" he demanded, looking at the horse. "Are you drunk? We waited for you to show up for supper—"

"Shut up—leave me alone," I said.

"But, kid—"

I swung on him then. I let go almost two hundred pounds back of that punch. I was hard as iron from long hours in the saddle; I was gaunt and lean and growing; I was more that six feet tall; I was crowding two hundred pounds. I swung on him with everything I had. He dodged it; somehow.

"I ought to kill you," I said. "I just naturally ought to kill you."

"Holy smokes! You *are* drunk," he gasped, backing away. "Why, kid, you oughten hit the liquor that way now that Lenore—"

"Leave me alone," I cried out and turned my back.

I left him to unsaddle the gelding and put him in the barn. I walked up the gentle slope of the hill and finally sat down beside Quong's long abandoned coyote trap. I put my head between my knees and cried like a kid. I just couldn't help it.

It must have been almost ten o'clock when I entered the kitchen's back door. Lights were still on in a number of rooms. Dad had built the ranch house big. Quong had left a light burning in the kitchen; figuring I'd want to invade the oven and fill up on the beef and potatoes he had left for me. I didn't go to the oven. I wasn't hungry. I blew out the light and headed toward the hall and my own bedroom.

I heard voices coming out of the hall; Slim and Lenore talking. I pulled up, not trying to listen but not wanting them to know anybody was around. He was standing outside the door of her bedroom. She was in a flimsy night dress that showed her bare arms and, beneath the dress, her soft, round, seductive breasts.

"But, honey, I'm your husband, I love you," Slim was pleading softly. "I've been waiting all these months, hoping you'd come back. That's why

I returned to the ranch. I figured that after you'd been off to yourself awhile you'd want to come back to me. And when I saw you for the first time this evening my heart really did a dog-goned nip-up. Let me come in, honey."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Slim, but it's no go. I didn't know what I was doing the night we ran away after Wes killed Joe at the dance. I was a young girl who didn't know any better. I'm grown up now, Slim, and it wouldn't be right for me to share a bed with you now that I know it's a mistake."

She was edging the door shut as she finished. It cracked out the light and plunged the hall into blackness once more. I heard something like a sigh go out of poor Slim Holcomb's lungs. He really loved my sister.

He stumbled on out of the hallway onto the front porch and down the steps, a stunned, broken man. I stood there a little longer, figuring that she might change her mind and go call him back. But she didn't. Then, across the hallway, a door cracked slightly and I saw part of Luke's face; one eye and an end of the mustache. There was a hard, satisfied grin on it at the thought that Lenore was practically a single woman again.

I stepped into the hallway, catching him flat footed. "Looking for boogers or something, Luke?" I asked casually.

"Why . . . no, Jim. Just wanted to air out the room a little before turning in."

"Well, maybe you better lock it, in case you walk in your sleep?"

He looked at me, puzzled. "Why, kid?"

"Oh, I once woke up and thought I heard a man walking down here in the middle of the night, and shot the whole bannister off the stairs," I replied carelessly.

CHAPTER XX

THINGS really started humming around the ranch the next morning. Lenore in the kitchen with Quong, just like the old days; laughing and talking. Dad shaving himself by the kitchen door, standing in front of a small mirror, turning his bony face now and then and then teasing her. Quong bustled about, setting out plates. I sat with a cup of coffee in one hand, feeling so happy I even chatted with Luke beside me. Lenore's gay laughter seemed to fill that house and warm it. I finished my coffee and Dad said, "Son, come over here and shave my neck."

I went over and lathered the back of his neck and then took the razor, telling him he was getting a little wrinkled. He had powder burns across the back of his neck, years old; burns that marked him for life when he grabbed the barrel of a six shooter one night and got it up over his shoulder, trying to save another man's life. The gun had roared almost under his ear, powder burning under the skin. Black flecks.

"Old?" he scoffed. "Why, dad-blast your overgrown hide. I'm only fifty-five. You think your dad is old? All right, lay right down there on that floor and I'll Indian wrestle you."

Lenore let out a shriek of laughter, her eyes dancing. "Go on, Jim; go on, you big overgrown ox. He'll flip you over in a hurry."

I grinned and laid down flat on my back and Dad put away the towel and came over, lying down beside me, his head at my feet. "Luke, you come over here and referee. You count for us. This danged son of mine thinks he's a growed up man now just because he's bigger than a two year old steer. I got to show him his old paw is still the *man* around this family."

Luke came over, standing above us.

Quong had forgotten the frying ham. His almond-shaped eyes were glittering with suppressed excitement. Luke started to instruct us.

"Now remember," he admonished, making a big show of it for Lenore's benefit, "when I count one you raise your legs up together and then lower them. When I count two you raise them a second time and lower them. When I count three you lock legs and try to roll the other man over. All set? One!"

We raised legs. My booted foot stuck up a good four inches past Dad's. Luke counted two. We raised again and lowered to the floor.

"Three!" Luke Osborn shouted and our legs came up.

I CAUGHT him just back of the ankle and drove all the power in my young body into the heave. There was a crash and the kitchen shook. Plates rattled on the breakfast table and Lenore's shrieks of laughter drowned them out. Dad got up, fifteen feet away. He'd skinned the bridge of his nose when he bounced off the end of the table and was holding his arm. I'd somersaulted him *twice!*

Lenore collapsed with laughter, squealing and shrieking, and Quong's yells almost tore off the roof of the big kitchen. Quong seldom laughed. He grinned all the time, but on rare occasions did he let go with belly laughs. Now he staggered around the kitchen in his booted feet, holding his aproned middle—howling like a Sioux Indian. Luke Osborn sat at the table, face buried in one hand, his shoulders shaking convulsively. He put his face down in both arms on the table and almost wept. He raised up and reached for a handkerchief, wiping at his wet eyes.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned and buried his face in his arms on the table once more, convulsed with laughter.

Dad was gripping his left elbow. He'd take the hand away and run it experimentally over the raw bridge of his skinned nose and then get hold of his sprained elbow again. He was roaring with laughter, but there was a funny look in his eyes; a look of dawning respect for his son. Then he came over and stuck out his hand.

"By Godfrey, son," he said, crushing my hand in a grip that was still iron. "I ain't much on book learnin', but I seem to have read somewhere that the Jews hold a ceremony for their sons when they become of age. From then on they're a man. And when a son of mine can almost slam me through a log wall, then he's sure growed up to be a man."

"It was a ceremony, all right," Lenore laughed, going over and looking at Dad's skinned nose. A drop of blood had collected on the sharp tip. She wiped it away with her apron.

"It sure was a *ceremony,* all right," she giggled. "Gee, Dad, I hope Jim never gets mad at me. If he keeps on growing we'll have to put bigger doors in the house so he can walk in. Why, darn him, he doesn't know his own strength! He ought to be ashamed of himself, taking advantage of ordinary people like that."

"It was a ceremony, all right," Luke Osborn put in. "But I think Jim's becoming a man ought to be celebrated in the right way. Ed, this is Tuesday. How about giving a dance out here this Saturday night?"

Dad forgot his elbow and slapped his right leg. "Why, dog-gone me, why didn't I think of it before? Sure, we'll give a dance. You bet your life we'll give a dance. We'll invite everybody. We'll have Joe Hodge and Ike over. We'll really throw a good one at the Devers ranch."

Lenore clapped her hands excitedly. "This Saturday night? Oh, Dad, you wonderful darling!" and she went over and hugged him.

"Aw, give Luke the credit," Dad said, heading for the table. "He's the one suggested it."

"We'll have everybody out," Lenore said delightedly. "We'll get Ruth and all the girls in town. We'll have those five Talber brothers to play. We'll have a wonderful time."

A SHADOW darkened the doorway as we all sat down to eat the sizzling ham and eggs and hot biscuits served by Quong and Lenore. Slim. He stood, hat in hand, a little awkwardly. He looked like he hadn't slept in a week; and I could imagine him laying down there in his bunk all last night, thinking of Lenore, his wife, alone in the big bed up in her room. He must have gone through the fires of hell.

"What do you want me to do today, Jim?" he asked, proving that his coming up to the house was just an excuse to see Lenore; to look at her; to feast his man hungry eyes on the woman he so loved.

He knew what he was supposed to do; ride the south end, push back any strays, and extend the fence.

"About the same as usual, Slim," I said. "The quicker you get that fence across the south end of the range the quicker it'll ease up the work."

He still stood, awkwardly; I felt sorry for him. "How are you, Lenore?" he asked.

"Oh, swell, Slim. We've been having all kinds of fun this morning. Dad and Jim Indian wrestled. We're going to give a dance this Saturday night. We'll all have loads of fun."

Poor Slim. We all paid particular attention to our plates, covering our own embarrassment. All except Luke. He sat upright, the faint outlines of a grin beneath his blond mustache, his white teeth barely visible between his parted lips. I finished breakfast in silence and went out.

Wes worked at the ranch that day. The eight cow branding chutes were getting a little old and loose. He was carrying over new poles from a pile and fastening them in, trimming with an ax and driving big nails in deep. When the nails were in he took short lengths of wire, unravelled them, used pinchers to remove the barbs, and then used the wire to lash the ends of the nailed poles. That way the new stuff being branded wouldn't scratch itself when it reared and plunged in the chutes, a pole in front and a pole behind, holding it close while we stuck the glowing stamping iron between the rails and branded it. Lenore came out with a pot of coffee and a cup for him.

He took the coffee and blew in the cup to cool it, his glowing eyes on Lenore. "Damn, but you're pretty," I heard him say. "You're more beautiful than you used to be before you married Slim."

"Oh, now am I?" she mocked, a hand on her hip and her green eyes taunting; another standard trait of hers. I knew them all.

I saw his eyes drinking her in; hot eyes, filled with passion, and I got mad. He had no right looking at her that way. He was engaged to Ruth Rogers. Lenore was Slim's wife, though now in name only. I smothered down a muffled curse, thinking that maybe I'd better get Wes off the ranch; fire him, if I had to. I didn't like the way he was looking at my sister, who had been his sweetheart.

On Thursday of that week I saddled the gelding Quong and I had emasculated. Dad and Luke were still at the

ranch, Dad happier than I had ever seen him. Luke was pretending to show him some card tricks, how to deal with one hand, sliding them off under the thumb. I thought of the silent inscrutable Quong and some of the things *he* could show Luke about dealing with one hand; impatiently wondering when he was going in and clean out Luke Osborn.

I RODE the gelding up the slope and past Quong's now weed grown and caved in coyote "trap," looking for the two heifers Quong was hunting the day Lenore came home. I circled for three miles west of the ranch, keeping to the ridges and watching the buckbrush below. Presently I caught a flash of red and went down. The heifer, wild as a deer, broke for the lower end of the gully. I spurred after her.

I fought her for a half hour, spurring the gelding in and out of gullies and ravines, but she just *wouldn't* turn. She was wild and spooky now and didn't want to go back.

"All right, damn you," I muttered and took down my rope. "You got to learn a little cow manners and you might as well start in now."

I shook out a small loop and sent the gelding down the gravelly floor of the ravine, his belly flattened out, the heifer running like a streak. The loop sang out and settled around her fore feet. I jerked up hard, the end dallied around the horn. She hit the end of the forty foot lariat with the gelding bracing himself to take the shock. The saddle went up but held fast, with me almost over on the horse's neck, bent in the saddle.

The earth shook when she hit in a cloud of dust. A grunt went out of her you could have heard for a half mile. I gigged the gelding forward, shaking and weaving the rope to loose the loop off her front feet. She got up, scared and dazed, and took off again. I put her down a second time, the gelding almost losing his footing. The third time she almost got away, and I thought I'd have to drag her all the way back to our west fence, cut the wire, and force her through. So I caught her around the neck with the rope as she broke down the side of a gully and plunged for buckbrush so thick you couldn't walk through it.

The gelding lost his footing. He went down end over end with me underneath, the heifer loping wild-eyed down the canyon, the rope dragging. That's why you never tie to a saddle horn; you dally. The rope came loose and I lay there for a minute, dust in my mouth and pain shooting fire through my left shoulder.

I got up and staggered over, making a mental cursing note that I'd go back and get my Spencer carbine and slam a slug through her red ribs. I was that mad.

The gelding was dead, its snapped neck doubled back queerly. It had died instantly. I bent and jerked its neck straight and then removed the bridle, leaning over further with legs straddled to unbuckle the cinch. I noted that most of the strands on the belly were broken. I went around and got hold of the saddle through the opening in the fork below the horn. The gelding's carcass half raised from the ground as I lifted it with one hand and dragged the saddle free. I slung saddle and bridle over my good shoulder and set off for the ranch, limping and cursing that red heifer. I trudged past Quong's hole in the ground and went on down to the stable, tossing the saddle in a stall and then heading for the harness room on the end of the milk shed to get a new girth I'd thoughtfully bought at the hardware store in Montrose, months be-

fore.

Just before I reached the milk shed I heard voices.

It was Wes and Lenore talking. He had her backed up in a corner of the milk shed, the same corner where a long time ago he'd stood and tried to make love to her. He was smothering her with kisses, she making a pretense of fighting him off. She finally turned her head and pushed him away to arms' length, her green hellcat eyes bright like silver dollars.

"Oh, my now, aren't you the fine one though, you darling?" she mocked. "You engaged to Ruth Rogers and making love to me—a respectable married woman! Shame on you, Wesley Allen."

"The hell with Ruth," he growled through clenched teeth, his eyes flashing. "She's a nice kid—they don't come any better. But it's you I want, Lenore. I always have wanted you and you know it, you pretty little devil."

He went in again, shoving her bracing arms aside, and though she fought him off I noticed how her slim body clung to his and her arms went up around his neck as he showered kisses on her lips, cheeks, and neck.

I was about to clear my throat to let them know they weren't alone when a man entered the end of the shed, on his way to the harness room to put up his fence building tools. Slim.

CHAPTER XXI

SLIM HOLCOMB carried a small canvas bag of staples in his left hand, a claw hammer in his right. In his eyes was a kind of tiredness that hadn't come from work on the fence. His face was drawn.

He didn't say anything for a few moments, while his eyes played over the other two and the guilty expressions on their flushed countenances. But, while I watched, a change came over Slim. In that moment, I think, all the love he had felt for my sister Lenore was consumed in some kind of contemtuous fire burning inside him.

"You're no good, Lenore," he said, choking up a little. "You never were. God must have been cursing this part of Montana on the day that you were born. That's what I think of you now—cheating on a girl like Ruth, who's got more good in her than both of you put together."

That was all he said. He walked on past them; past a silent, shame-faced Wes and a wide-eyed Lenore. She couldn't seem to believe what she had just heard. She pushed Wes aside and half started after Slim. She was sorry now; she was a little afraid.

Slim came on through into the harness shed and saw me standing there. He nodded but didn't speak. I followed him in and got the new girth. He hung up the claw hammer and I noticed that his hands were trembling.

"You made only one mistake with her, Slim," I said to my brother-in-law. "You should have beat her ears down a couple of times."

He nodded and put away the staples. I went on over to work on the saddle and, presently, Dad and Luke Osborn strolled into the stable. I was bent over the saddle on the floor.

I told Dad about the gelding getting killed when I roped just as the heifer hit the buckbrush. It really had been my fault. I shouldn't have looped her while the horse was plunging down the incline.

"Never mind about the horse," he said. "Just as long as you're all right. We can't afford getting you killed now, son; not with Lenore back with us. You all right?"

"Well, my shoulder's pretty stiff

where he rolled over with me under him," I said.

"You go over and strip off your shirt and have Lenore work you over with liniment," he ordered.

"All right," I said.

Susie ambled into the corral, sticking her head in the end of the stable. Luke saw her and his eyes got that peculiar glint in them. "There's that slant-eyed Chink's mule again, Ed," he said. "When are you going to sell her to me? I want that mule."

"She's not for sale," Dad replied.

"I'll give you three hundred cash for her—no, three fifty, Ed! Three hundred and fifty dollars *cash*, Ed!"

"I'd sell her to you in a minute for half that price, Luke, but Quong is fond of her. After all, she practically belongs to him anyhow. But Jim won't stand for it. He'd tear up this ranch if I sold her—and he's dog-goned big enough now to do it. I found that out Indian wrestling," he added with a grin.

THEY went out and I got the new girth put on and slung the saddle over a manger rail. Quong was in the milk shed milking our one cow and Wes wasn't around. I saw Lenore enter the bunkhouse, after Slim. I stopped and listened. She was pleading with him, making excuses; saying she hadn't realized what she was doing. She was only teasing Wes for old times' sake.

He wasn't quarreling with her. He was telling her in a quiet way that he didn't care for her anymore. She must have been cut to the quick. Maybe her pride was hurt. Maybe she was a little afraid of this new quietness of his. Maybe she was genuinely sorry and wanted to make up for the way she had treated him.

"I can't believe that, Slim. You know you still love me and that I love you. I was wrong, darling, and I'm going to make it up to you. Beginning tonight you're coming up and start sleeping in the ranch house. That's where you belong, darling. Up there with me. You're one of the Devers family now."

I went on up to the house and hunted around for the liniment in the kitchen cup-board, stripping off my shirt. Presently she came in. Her eyes were wet. She was crying a little.

"Cut out the squalling act and come rub my shoulder," I said gruffly. "My horse rolled over on me and sprained it."

Wes had saddled up and gone on in town before supper and she tried again about dark, returning from the bunkhouse alone. Wes didn't come back that night nor the next day. Lenore had gone to the bunkhouse and, in Slim's absence, cleaned it up neat and gathered up all his clothes to wash and mend. Dad and Luke still loafed around the ranch, talking their big deals. When Wes wasn't back by Saturday morning I knew he was on a toot in town. After dinner that noon I hooked up a span to the light wagon and went in town to Andy Calders' place. We'd left word there about the dance and Andy had spread it around, also sending word to the musicians. I went in and bought a five gallon keg of whiskey.

"You coming out to the dance, Andy?" I asked as he came puffing out from back of the bar and headed for the wagon with the keg in his arms.

"You dog-goned right I'm comin' out, boy! I wouldn't miss this one for the world. I sent word to Ike and Joe to bring all their riders and come over. A lot of people in town are driving out. We ought to have a whopping good time."

"We sure ought to," I agreed.

He came back and went behind the bar. "Drink?" he asked. "It's on the house."

"Thanks, Andy," I said. "But I sort of promised somebody I wouldn't drink anymore. I'm off the stuff from now on."

His eyes twinkled. "Dog-gone! A girl, hey?"

"Well, yes, I guess she's my girl."

"Well, what do you know! Here, Jim, here's a gallon of rum that I let that fool drummer sell me six months ago, thinking the boys might like it in cold weather but they don't. It's my contribution to the dance. How's Lenore?"

"Fair to middling. You seen Wes the last couple of days?"

HE NODDED, his face darkening. "He's sure been on a good one, Jim. Only this time it's different. He ain't drinking like he used to. He just drinks a little at a time and keeps right on putting it down. He's been up to the livery to see Ruth a lot but most of the time he just puts the stuff down and looks at the wall. He's averaged almost a quart a day yesterday and today. He was in a little while ago, not staggering at all but full up to the brim. He's getting the shakes. Spilled his drink all over the bar. You ought to take him home with you and get him in shape for the dance tonight."

"I'll go up and see if I can find him," I said. "Well . . . see you tonight, Andy. Right after supper."

"Right, Jim. We'll be there."

I went over and got a hair cut and my boots shined and then jogged the team over to the livery. I set the brake and jumped down as Ruth and her mother came out. They were running the place now and doing all right, the coal dealer's sixteen year old son taking care of feeding and watering.

"Howdy, Mrs. Rogers," I said to Mildred. "Howdy, Ruth. How's everything going?"

They were genuinely glad to see me. Hal's death some weeks back had left its mark on their faces, but they were strong and reliant. I thought of Ruth kneeling out there on her father's grave, praying for Wes, and couldn't look her in the eye. She might have suspected.

"Seen Wes around the last few minutes?" I asked casually, after a time.

"He was here a little while ago," Ruth answered. "Said he was going down and get something to eat before heading back for the dance tonight. We wanted him to stay and eat with us up at the house but he wouldn't do it."

"I sure hope you two will come out to the dance at the ranch tonight," I told them. "I know it hasn't been too long since Hal—uh—passed on, but we were all good friends and I think he wouldn't mind at all."

"I'm sure he wouldn't, Jim, and thank you," Mildred said. "Yes, I think we'll be out. We'll close up early and eat supper and come out in the rig."

"Say, that's swell," I said, and put a booted foot on the front wheel hub. "Well, I guess I better get back and get set for the fireworks. We'll be expecting you by dark or a little after. Andy is bringing out his family. We'd all ought to have a good time. See you after supper."

I waved to them and drove back to the ranch. Wes passed me while I was crossing basin, loping along. He didn't look drunk. He gave a curt wave of the hand as he passed by and went on.

Lenore had spent a couple of hours getting the place in shape, aided by Luke and Quong. The big kitchen was cleared, the table over in a corner. The kitchen led into the hall, and the first door on the right led into our south wing living room, which was a whopper. By sitting almost in the hallway, the musicians could play into both kitchen

and living room. I brought in the keg and gallon demijohn and put them on the kitchen table. Dad and Luke started sampling. Lenore fixed up a hot rum for herself. Wes and Slim came in pretty soon, not together, Dad bellowing down for them to come over and have potluck supper Quong fixed up. We stood around and ate, talking and laughing, though Wes didn't say much.

Slim was dressed in a new one of his expensive outfits. His hair was slicked down and there was an orange colored silk handkerchief pulled snug at his throat. I'd never seen a handsomer looking man than Slim Holcomb was that night, and I think Lenore was affected too. She hung on to him, making him promise to dance every other one with her.

I thought, yeah, you got to make a good appearance in front of all your friends, playing the loyal and devoted wife to your husband; and then went upstairs to put on my Sunday suit.

ANDY CALDERS was the first to arrive, rattling up in a rig with his wife and four bundled up offspring. He bawled out, "Hey, bring on them pretty gals!" and began unloading. More people came by horse and wagon. Ike McCauley and some of his riders loped up, soon followed by Joe Hodge and three of his men. The place began to fill; a babel of voices arose. Loud whoops outside anounced that the five musicians had put in appearance, the youngest who played the piano coming in with a banjo under one arm. I led them over for drinks and the dance got under way.

Then Ruth and her mother entered the kitchen door and Lenore broke off dancing with Andy Calders and ran to Ruth with a little shriek, smothering her with kisses. She took her upstairs where all the ladies had put their wraps and Dad, a little high, grabbed Mildred, wraps and all, and started waltzing with her.

This looked like it was going to be a good one. The Devers family were back together again and doing things up right!

About the time we got ready for the first square dance Lenore and Ruth came downstairs. Lenore had on her brown dress, the one she had worn home that previous Monday, and, with her green eyes, easily overshadowed the rest of the girls. But I knew that nothing about her could ever overshadow Ruth Rogers' simple beauty and wholesomeness. I thought of her kneeling out there alone on her father's grave. I knew that Lenore had not been back to the cemetery to see Mom's grave since we had erected the white tree trunk tombstone.

Lenore led Ruth over to where I was talking winter feed with Joe Hodge. Joe had a drink in his hand, corn cob in the other, and was giggling.

"Just look at him!" Lenore said to Ruth, standing a head and a half below me. Her green eyes were happy and bantering. "He's my kid brother. He's the little boy who never ropes a steer. He just rides over and picks them up under one arm."

"I roped a heifer this afternoon," I grinned.

"Oh, sure he did. And what happened? The poor horse rolled down a gully bank with him and broke its neck. It broke its neck when it rolled over on Jim. So what does he do? He got up off the poor horse he'd crushed, lifted it up with one hand and took off the saddle with the other, then came on back to the ranch and said, 'Rub my shoulder. I sprained it.' He's such a delicate little thing!"

"A horse rolled over on you, Jim?"

Ruth gasped out. "Why . . . you didn't say anything about it when you were in town."

"Well, I forgot about it," I half muttered, feeling very uncomfortable all of a sudden. I just wasn't much of a hand with the girls.

"They're getting pardners for the square," Lenore said. "Come on, Jim. I promised Slim this dance but he's outside somewhere with the boys."

About nine o'clock some of the men who didn't dance went down to the bunk house, built up a big fire, got the place warm and started playing poker. I poured out a pitcher full of whiskey and carried it down with my arms overflowing with cups. Luke Osborn was in the game. His coat was off and the betting was getting heavy. I was astonished to see Quong sitting in. He sat across from Luke and his black eyes were impassive. He wasn't fumbling the cards now.

Wesley Allen was in the game, sitting next to Quong. He cupped the cards close up against his chest, a cigarette dangling sullenly from a corner of his mouth. On the wall back of his chair hung old Harley's two .44-40's.

CHAPTER XXII

"HOW are you boys making out?" I asked, placing the cups around the table. I moved around, pouring.

"I wasn't making out a-tall," Mel Perritt grinned. "Not until you loped in with that fire juice. I ought to do a lot better now. It'll ease the pain of me losing mah dog-goned hard earned wages to this bunch of thievin' polecats."

A laugh went around the table; all except Wes. He drained his cup, grimaced, and fingered a big stack of silver. Several bills were flattened out on the oil cloth under the hard money.

He slid out four silver dollars on a king, waited, and then met Luke Osborn's raise. Quong threw in his cards while the rider who was dealing put down the final stud round. Luke raked on the pot and Buster picked up the deck for the next deal.

I hung around and waited. I wanted to talk with Wes. He finally rose, pushing back his chair, and went outside, back of the bunkhouse. I followed him.

"Now look here, Wes," I said. "Ruth is up at the house dancing and you're supposed to be up there with her."

"Yeah?" came his voice through the night.

"You're engaged to her, old timer, but you haven't danced a single time with her all evening. Go on up," I urged.

"Are you trying to tell me how to run my business, Jim?" he half grunted.

Maybe it was the Devers temper in me. Or maybe I was just pretty sore over the way he had been making love to Lenore when he knew she was Slim's wife. But I felt something began to get tight down inside my stomach. I went in closer to him.

"Look, Wes," I said coldly. "A lot of gents around here side step you now just because you've killed a man. But I don't happen to be one of them. You've been getting away with a few things that would have got the head shot off a lot of men; and anytime you think I won't tangle with you, then you'd better get that idea right out of year head, because I will."

"You didn't do so good the other evening when you swung on me," he sneered. "Did you? You were drunk."

"I wasn't drunk. But I'm going to tell you something. I'd just got back from the cemetery that night. I go out there quite often to have a talk with my mother that we buried almost seven

years ago. And—"

"The devil you say!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know that, kid."

"Of course you don't. Neither does Dad nor Lenore. But I go out there every time I get a chance. Sometimes I just stand and tell her what's troubling me. Sometimes I sit down on her grave and talk to her for an hour, all by myself. And do you know what I saw out there one night recently?"

He was staring at me curiously, the ugliness gone from his face. "No," he said.

"Well, I'm going to tell you, Wes. I saw Ruth Rogers. She was down on her knees on poor Hal's grave. She was asking God to look out after you and lead you into the right paths. She said you were lost. She was asking God to forgive her for any sins she had committed. Just imagine a clean, sweet kid like her *sinning!*"

He came over a step and placed a hand on my shoulder, even the darkness failing to hide the stunned look on his face.

"Holy mother, Jim! She was doing that for *me?* She was praying for a hard drinking no good jail bird like me?"

He couldn't seem to believe it. He just couldn't get it through his head.

"Forget the jail bird stuff, Wes," I said gruffly. "Any man is entitled to make one mistake and you made it when you killed Luke's pardner. But it's all forgotten now. Ruth's waiting for you inside. Go on in and pick up your money. Go up and dance with her."

"I sure as the devil will—right now," he muttered. "God, what a crazy hot head I am. I ought to have my brains knocked out."

I THOUGHT of him making love to Lenore out in the milk shed and got all confused. The world, I thought, was a crazy place sometimes. I went in with him while he picked up his money. We walked over together toward the kitchen. On the porch, all alone, were two people: Slim and Lenore.

They had been quarrelling. Or maybe she had been quarrelling with him. She saw Wes Allen and me and then her chin went up. In the light from the doorway I could see that old petulant expression at the corners of her mouth. Her head lifted and she said to Slim, dramatically, for the benefit of Wes and me:

"Very well, Edgar Holcomb, if that's the way you feel about it. I've tried to make up to you and be a good wife. You know I was a good wife to you while we were together. But it's all done now. You don't appreciate me, but I know somebody else who does. Wes, come inside and dance with me. My husband has got on one of his mean streaks."

Wes hesitated, but she took his arm. She led him inside and pushed her slim, seductive body into his arms. They danced three straight dances while Slim Holcomb and I stood outside in the biting night air and smoked one cigarette after another. It was warm in the kitchen now and, between dances, Wes had gone to the keg and loaded up. He had forgotten Ruth. Even Dad had noticed it and gone over from Mildred to dance with her.

Wes had Lenore in his arms. He was looking down at her upturned face and all the hardness was coming back into his own face; his eyes were flecked. He was drunk now and didn't care about anything, except that Lenore was in his arms. His face looked brutal; ugly.

"We've got to stop that," Slim muttered. "It's not fair to Ruth. I guess I was too easy on Lenore, Jim, loving

her the way I did. Now, Wes in there is different. He's hard. He'd quarrel with her every day, sure; he'd slap the daylights out of her. And she'd love him the more. That's where I made my mistake, Jim. I'm too easy going. But we can't let that go on in there. We've got to stop it."

I went in and called Lenore out. Wes came with her. "I want to talk to you, Lenore," I snapped. "Come on out here away from the house."

We all went out; the four of us. I was trying to reason with her. Slim was talking to Wes, pleading with him.

"Now look here, dog-gone it, Wes," Slim said as we stood half way between the house and the bunk room where the poker game was in progress. "You and Lenore have got everybody looking at you. It ain't that she's my wife. That's all done; but you ain't got no call to treat Ruth this way. She's—"

"You shut up," Wes Allen said, icily.

"I ain't going to shut up," Slim insisted doggedly. "I'm your friend, Wes. You know that. But—"

"*You* shut up!" Wes snarled.

I reached over and got him by the front of his green wool shirt. Wes stood five feet eight and weighed a hundred and fifty-five pounds. I stood six feet two and weighed two hundred. I was putting on poundage every day and still growing taller.

I JERKED him up close to me, half lifting him from the ground with one big fist clenched in the front of the wool shirt. "Maybe you're the one who had better shut up, Wes, or I'm going to close that mouth of yours with a fist," I said. "You and Lenore are both of the same stripe. Both of you are no good. Slim was right. You two got the idea that this country was built for you special and that nobody else's feeling matters. You two knot heads—"

"It's all Slim's fault," flared Lenore. "He caused it all."

I looked at her, still holding Wes by his shirt front. "Just one more word out of you and I'm going to slap you all the way from here to the corral. Now you two are going back inside. You're going back separate and you better stay separated for the rest of the evening."

"Jim's right, Wes," put in Slim. "I'm your friend but don't let me catch you two dancing again tonight. Not together."

Wes Allen jerked free, buttons flying from the front of his shirt. He ducked under my arm with the speed of a cat and swung at Slim, knocking him down. Slim came up fast and drove a sodden blow into Wes's ugly, brutal face. Wes reeled back and something like a hoarse, animal cry broke from him. He wheeled and sprinted for the bunkhouse door. He was back out again, almost at once, Harley's gunbelt on, one of the loaded .44-40's gripped in his right hand. He almost leaped at Slim.

The gun lifted. It roared within two feet of Slim's chest, the foot long streak of orange fire lighting up Slim's surprised face. He went down on his back and Wes Allen deliberately stepped astraddle of his body, legs braced far apart.

Coldly, methodically, he shot Slim five times more through the chest as he lay on the ground.

He straightened and I caught a look at his face. It was flaming. His eyes were the eyes of a mad puma, burning and almost shining. All the ugliness and murderous venom in his warped mind were there. He was no longer the cow puncher who had simply made one mistake.

Wes Allen had turned killer.

He broke for Mel's horse, standing saddled close by. He hit the saddle in a

bound, gun still in hand, and I turned to Lenore. She stood with a balled fist in her open mouth, fighting down scream after scream, her green eyes wide and staring.

"Well, you can go file that second notch on your gun, Lenore," I said. "You've just killed your second man."

Men and women were spilling out of the ranch house in a threshing stream to get to the scene of the shooting. The bunk house already was boiling out poker players with Luke in the lead, still in his shirt sleeves. Andy Calders came running and yelling. Hoofbeats were drumming up the slope, Wes spurring Mel's horse hard. I heard a crash up there on the ridge, and instinctively knew that Quong's long abandoned coyote trap had finally served some use after all. Wes's horse had fallen into it.

"What happened, Jim?" Andy bellowed, looking down at Slim.

"Wes killed him, Andy," I replied, my voice trembling. "Shot him down without a chance. Slim was unarmed. It was cold blooded murder, Andy. Wes Allen has turned killer."

"Jim, I'm swearing you in as a deputy. Get a horse. We're going after him!"

I RAN inside for my old Spencer, making sure the long tube in the stock contained seven cartridges and was fully loaded. The wall above it, where the gunbelt had hung on a nail, looked bare. Terribly bare.

Joe Hodge came up to Andy. "Not a one of my boys are packing a gun, Andy," he said. "Neither are Ike's. And Wes seems to be armed."

"I know it, dog-gone the luck," Andy swore. "But Jim and me will go after him. Luke, you've got a gun under your shirt, don't tell me you haven't. You want to come along?"

"No," Luke Osborn said calmly. "I'm a businessman, Andy. Catching killers is your job. That's what you get paid for."

"Take my horse, Andy," Joe Hodge said. "We're about the same build. He's over by the garden fence, back of the kitchen."

I started for a long, clean limbed bay belonging to one of Ike McCauley's riders, because he was tall and long legged like me. As I went for him I saw Lenore standing alone, forgotten, by the bench near the corner of the bunk house.

"Jim," she whimpered, "Jim, it really wasn't my fault, was it? Wes was just no good. I always knew—"

I slammed her down with the palm of my hand, stinging pain cutting through the callouses, I hit her that hard. She crumpled on the bench, moaning and crying as Ruth ran up and got her in her arms. I mounted the bay and drove heels into his sides, racing for the corner of the corral where Andy was loping past.

"Watch out, Andy!" I yelled. "His horse is up there in a hole. I heard him fall in. Maybe Wes got him out but don't take any chances."

Andy slowed up, pulling a pistol from a hip pocket holster. We went up and finally approached the hole. The horse had fallen in all right, but Wes had got him out. We separated and I cut south, keeping to the floor of the gullies. I knew every foot of that country. I rode a mile and a half, swung far to the west, pulling up every now and then to listen. Then I heard a horse, a limping horse and Wes cursing.

I jumped down and went forward. He came out on a ridge, outlined dimly at two hundred yards. I dropped to one knee and opened up with the Spencer, levering shells fast, shooting at the horse: shooting high, because of the gun's short range.

I heard him yell as he buck jumped the animal off down the side of the ridge and disappeared into the night, and I cursingly realized that I had no more cartridges. I went back after more and rode all night long, far to the west. I swung back to Montrose and prowled around the livery and Mrs. Rogers' dark house. But there was no sign of him. Day was breaking when I rode up the street on the tired horse, shivering from cold, and saw Andy, coming down to open up for some of his customers who liked an early drink.

"No luck, huh?" he asked.

"No luck," I grunted and swung down, stiff from the cold.

"I heard the Spencer going but by the time I got over there you and Wes were gone."

He unlocked the front door and we went in. I built a big fire in the pot bellied stove, shivering and telling him about missing Wes with the Spencer. He got a blackened coffee pot, went outside to the pump, came back and put the pot on top of the stove. We sat by the fire, drinking coffee.

"Dog-gone it, my day man would take his day off just when I get in late from a dance and chasing Wes Allen over half the state of Montana. I'm sleepy. I sent word to Ed Baker by one of Joe's riders. Ed'll get him if he's still in the county. But I doubt it. If Wes has got any sense he'll be heading that stolen cayuse for the Wyoming Territory line and the back country."

"He'll be back, Andy," I said.

"Huh?"

"Wes Allen will come back," I told Andy Calders that cold autumn morning in his saloon in Montrose.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE coffee drove the chill from my insides, but I was still hungry. I told Andy so-long, rode the tired horse a few doors down the street, and swung down in front of old Ching's place. Ching stayed open every day in the year. Sunday meant little to him. He shuffled in from the kitchen, bowing and smiling, a long stemmed pipe in one hand.

"Hello, boy. Bleakfast?"

"Ham and eggs, Ching. I'm hungry."

"I get. Quong wloking?"

"Quong's still working," I said. "He's still got those worn out moccasins that you gave him, too, Ching. Come on now, old timer," I urged. "You gave him that new pair of moccasins you got from Charley when Quong wandered in here with a bad cut on the back of his head, and not remembering anything. But after he left your place he must have walked a lot farther than the distance out to—"

"No sabbe, boy," Ching said and went into the kitchen again.

I shrugged and let it go. He probably thought it was just nosiness on my part, which it wasn't at all. Quong apparently didn't remember even being in Ching's place. He believed that he came out of a strange world of the past, and the few references he had made to that life of the long ago left me much puzzled, mostly because I simply couldn't understand such things. My world was of the present. It revolved around Dad and Lenore, the Devers ranch that I was trying so hard to keep going, and Montrose. I wanted only an insight into what Quong believed about his life. But, as usual with old Ching, I found out exactly nothing.

I never found out. He was to go out as old Harley had gone, peacefully, his aged body demanding, and taking, its long earned rest.

Quong was in the stable that Sunday morning, currying down Susie, when I

led the borrowed horse across the corral to unsaddle him. He looked up, a question about Wes in his eyes, but I shook my head. A sudden thought struck me. I asked him about the poker game he'd been in when Wes began shooting.

"I lost," he said simply.

"You *lost?*" I snorted, half angrily. What was the matter with him anyhow? "You could have wiped him out clean and you know it."

"Luke? Yes, pardner, I could have wiped him out clean."

He never called me pardner except in close moments of this kind, and perhaps he sensed in my savage jerks at the cinch that my nerves were on edge from saddle exhaustion and loss of sleep and that I was getting mad clean through. He gave Susie a slap on her sleek rump and came over as I unbridled, his eyes soft, placating. His right hand went up to my gaunt young shoulder.

"Jim, if I try to explain something to you, will you try to understand?" he asked gently.

"I always have," I answered, gruffly. "We're pardners, ain't we?"

"You have certain beliefs about life, haven't you?"

"That's what Mom taught me and Lenore."

"Good. Come over here and sit down."

I plopped down tiredly on a sack of grain, half empty, that he kept for Susie. He seated himself across from me. The strange look on his face—I sensed something coming and all tiredness and irritation vanished in a flash.

"JIM," he began softly, clasped hands resting between his knees, "I've told you, and only you, that I lived in another period. Actually, pardner, this is my third reincarnation. It will be my last. The first life I spent as a swordsman with one of the ancient roving tribes on the plains of Asia. I was killed there, early in life, about two thousand years ago. I went across a certain kind of Line into a world that I must not reveal to you, to remain for several hundred years while my sins were being expiated. I was sent back a second time as a kind of priest, again somewhere in the East—I don't truly know where. That life was one of peace, working in a deep, hidden valley below a great mountain range, among shepherds. Do you see the connection? In each succeeding life one grows in wisdom and goodness . . . one goes higher, Jim. Then came the present. As I told you, my past life of the present is a complete blank—probably from the blow I received on the back of my head. I have no remembrance of where I was born *this* time or where I lived. I know only that I came out of nowhere with some instinct leading me to Susie that day and then to the ranch. I didn't know where I was—what country, among what people. I didn't know what language I spoke until you addressed me. You are the first man I conversed with, though the moment I heard your words I knew that I spoke English, and several other languages, perfectly.

"Something sent me here, Jim. I knew it from the first. I was sent here for some purpose. Please try to understand, will you, Jim?"

His hands were clenched together so hard now that his forearms, under the black silk sleeves of his shirt, were rigid. His eyes were pleading with me, begging me to believe.

"I'm sure trying to understand, old timer," I said gently. "Are you trying to tell me that this . . . well, past life of yours prevents you from going after Luke Osborn?"

He nodded, eagerly; almost like a kid. "That's why I'm worried, Jim. I wasn't sent back here as a Chinese gambler. I must have been sent for a *better* purpose? But what? That's why I haven't gone after Luke Osborn, Jim. That's why on many nights when you boys were asleep I've lain awake and tried to think . . . to *think,* Jim! Because if I can't find the answer, then I know that I'm doomed."

He got up and walked across the stall and stood with his back to me, hands shoved deep into his pockets while he looked out through the opening in the stable wall into the far reaches of the timbered hills. He was still standing there when I stepped quietly out and went on down to the bunkhouse.

The door was closed and all curtains pulled. I opened the door and went inside. Slim had been laid out on his bunk, hands folded across his chest. He still wore his new clothes of the night before, except the shirt. Dad and Quong had changed it and combed his hair.

Dad was in the kitchen with Mildred Rogers when I went up to the house. He looked up over his coffee cup. "You look all worn out, son. Better go upstairs and get some sleep."

"I intend to," I said. "Better have Quong saddle up after while and go look for that heifer with the rope on. She might be tangled up in the buckbrush."

"All right. Ed Baker and four men from Hoogan rode in at daylight for coffee and fresh horses. They're figuring on trying to pick up his trail west of here."

"He was over that way," I said. "How's Lenore?"

"Ruth's with her in her room, poor thing," Mildred put in. "Would you like some breakfast, Jim?"

I told her I'd eaten in town and went over to lean the Spencer in a corner. The stairs seemed to give off hollow sounds under my boots as I went up. I thought of Slim down there alone in the bunkhouse and of what Quong had said, and some kind of a small prayer went out of me as I slid out of the Sunday suit; a prayer that maybe Quong was at least partly right and that Slim was somewhere over across the Line being tallied for all those trips he'd made each Sunday to sit in the little church and listen to John Barker's messages of Hope and Trust about a World out beyond, where old Harley had gone.

THE house was pretty silent, dead with tragedy, during the two weeks of Indian Summer that followed Slim Holcomb's funeral in Montrose. I kept seeing the lighted candles in the church where he had sung, the somber crowd that filled it and flowed out into the dirt street, the long procession of buggies and wagons that followed him out to the cemetery. I tried to forget by digging in hard as mild weather set in. The grass in the basin was dying and, during early morning, faint traces of ice put in appearance at points along the small creek that watered our stock.

If the weather held good that winter we might, I thought, pull through those twenty-five broken down head that Dad and Luke Osborn had bought from Ike McCauley.

Dad was living back in the hotel in town again, Lenore, Quong and myself sharing the big ranch house. A new hand, Bill Durham, batched alone in the bunkhouse.

Lenore had lost weight. She moved about listlessly, the once bright greenness of her eyes dulled by brown shadows underneath. Nights, when I moved along the hallway to go unstairs and turn in, temptation sometimes came

strong to go in and tell her I was sorry. She knew that she had been responsible for Slim's death, and the knowledge made those first weeks a heavy burden. Ruth Rogers came out to see her every few days, usually remaining overnight. Lenore's only comfort when she needed it most.

During those trying days, when all of us were trying to forget, Quong went his own way, cooking most of the meals and seldom speaking while in the house. He had never been what could be called an inscrutable Chinese. Some inherent something born in him had developed an easy-going good nature that was almost westernized in aspect. Only on those occasions when he had confided in me those strange beliefs about his past "lives" had he become the real Oriental, at least in thought, because it was hard to consider a man as such when he put a hand on your shoulder and called you pardner.

Now, as grief and remorse drained the spirit in Lenore's soul to a low ebb, Quong seemed to withdraw into himself. I caught his eyes following her every movement when she wasn't looking and I wondered what was going on in that strange world of strange beliefs that was his mind.

I made a number of trips to town to see Dad, partly to get away from the depressing atmosphere that hung over the ranch. He was still drinking too much, but word began to drift to my ears that he was missing out on quite a few of the nightly poker games in Luke's domino parlor. That one puzzled me. I heard it again when winter fell in earnest and white snow blanketed the land.

Then one clear, cold afternoon shortly before Christmas I was in the the kitchen alone when a light rig on sled runners crunched up. As I opened the door Dad and Mildred, faces flushed from the cold, entered, stamping snow from their feet.

"Son," he cried out happily, "I've brought home a new mother for you and Lenore. Mildred and me fogged the snow over to Hoogan yesterday and got ourselves married."

"Holy cow!" I yelled, throwing the tin cup of steaming coffee up against the ceiling and making a rush for her.

I grabbed her up, wraps and all, and lifted her off the floor in a bear hug, whooping and kissing her and swinging her around in a circle. I sat her down and then smothered her with awkward kisses.

"You . . . you big unshaved *grizzley!"* she gasped out, laughing, her face filled with a new color. "I won't be able to breathe again for a week."

"Yessir," Dad said, grinning like a new groom of twenty. "We sure did."

A sound came from the hallway. Lenore had overheard. She flew into Mildred's welcoming arms, a laugh, the first in weeks, breaking hard from her. Then she began to cry from sheer relief and happiness.

I looked at Dad and nodded toward the door. It wasn't a place for menfolks. We went outside and began carrying in the load of household goods Mildred had brought from Montrose. She was selling the livery to Andy Calders and would rent her home. Ruth was staying in town until Andy took over before coming to the ranch.

I thought of her in there alone, and I thought of Wes Allen, still on the loose. He had stolen a horse from a ranch forty miles west of us. Ed Baker had lost his trail sixty miles south of there, guessing that Wes was heading for the bad country across the Wyoming Territory line.

WE STARTED winter feeding from the big stacks, scattering the hay

through the basin from heavily loaded ricks mounted on sled runners. Dad got out and worked with us a lot, though letting me run the place like I wanted to. He wouldn't touch a drop of liquor now. He had put on a little weight and looked less gaunt, his cheeks red like apples as the snow drove down and collected on his grey shot mustache. He and Mildred shared his north bedroom. Lenore slept in her own in the south wing, next to the big living room with the fireplace. Ruth had my old room upstairs. Quong, Durham, and myself were back in the bunkhouse.

I stayed pretty much with the boys, figuring I belonged with them, but partly because of Ruth Rogers' presence in the ranch house. She disturbed me in a way I couldn't understand. She and Mildred had brought into the lives of we three Devers something far more than I had ever dared to hope. It wasn't a cold, hollow, lonely house anymore. It was warm and filled with a new love and understanding, and I was happier than I'd ever been before. It was only when I sometimes rode in, covered with snow, and bent my gaunt six feet three of height under the doorway to stamp my feet and get a cup of hot coffee that now and then I'd feel Ruth's eyes watching me. Then I'd lose taste for the coffee and go outside again. I tried to avoid her as much as possible.

Luke Osborn began to spend a good deal of his time with us. At first he rode out afternoons and remained until it was too late to make the cold ride across the snowy basin back to his hotel in town. He and Dad were still the best of friends, though even after Luke began occupying his own room upstairs, I noticed, with inner saisfaction, that Dad seldom mentioned the "big deals" anymore. He was too happy and contented with his new family. Mildred moved about the big place every morning, Ruth and Lenore aiding her with the cooking and house work, with me loving my foster mother more and more every day. I could still remember all too vividly, those many years back, how she had taken me in her arms the night Mom died; and I worshiped her for the change she had wrought in Dad.

So Dad talked less and less of his big deals and Luke, too, appeared to have forgotten them. Luke Osborn had other things on his mind. There were two very pretty girls in the house, one of them a young widow. His eyes too followed Lenore a great deal of the time when she was around; furtively, when he thought the others weren't watching.

I treated him as civilly as was possible under the circumstances, but kept distance in the face of his continued efforts to make friends with me. He tried in a dozen different ways. If I happened to mention that I was short of money, Luke's hand promptly went to his hip pocket for an oversized, bulging snap purse, and I'd shake my head curtly. Once, in the bunkhouse, I turned my back on him and went over to Quong—and Luke Osborn's eyes went narrow with greed and speculation at sight of those thick sheaves of gold notes Quong carelessly removed from his belt.

Was Quong deliberately baiting him? Had the Chinese rider, in the face of his weird beliefs, changed his mind and begun laying a trap? I settled down to a game of watching and waiting and hoping.

We had a few small games in the bunkhouse, usually for loose silver. Luke always let me win—he went out of his way to lose when I bet against him. He was still trying to make friends. His eyes were still following Lenore.

Mildred and Ruth's entry into the life of the ranch had done as much for Lenore as for Dad. She brightened up and became gay once more, she and Ruth often laughing and giggling in her room. One snowy day I rode past the corner of the bunkhouse and a snowball shot past my head, followed by a shower. I threw up an arm and ducked, a spur rowel inadvertantly slamming the half broken bronk deep in the flanks. He let out a bawl and went straight up in the air, sunfishing.

I PICKED myself up out of the snow, watching the bronc let off rage and indignation in a series of angry bucking circles around the corral. Two bundled up figures, squealing with laughter, were lumbering for the sanctuary of the kitchen. I broke after them in a long legged run.

I caught the two of them at the edge of the back porch as Mildred and Dad, hearing the ruckus, came out.

"Get them, Jim!" Mildred cried out, her eyes dancing.

"Roll'em in the snow, son!" Dad yelled gleefully.

I dutifully obeyed, carrying a squealing, kicking bundle under each arm over to where the soft snow was piled in a four foot drift against the garden fence. They went down almost out of sight and I fell on top of the two, smearing their howling faces with big gobs of the white that blanketed the land and weighted the limbs of the surrounding timber.

"There, blast you!" I finally panted, getting up and dusting my mittened hands. "Maybe that'll teach you not to get me piled off my horse again."

I went after the now mollified bronc and noticed Quong in the doorway of the bunkhouse, apron around his middle. He grinned and waved, clasping both hands above his head.

Christmas came with its big candle lit fir tree in a corner of the living room near the fireplace, it fell behind and February rolled around. The weather moderated a bit and became almost warm during the day, presaging a possible late spring. Luke was almost living at the ranch now, and it was about then that I noticed the change in Lenore. Her eyes began to take on a new brightness and a couple of times she seemed to be filled with a strange restlessness. And I recognized the symptoms.

My sister was concealing something. I thought of Luke in the house and the little attentions he paid her in a manner all too casual. He was, despite his profession and a sometimes fishy grin beneath the carefully trimmed mustache, quite a handsome man. Slim Holcomb had been dead a good many months now and she was, despite Ruth's constant companionship, lonely and hungry inside. I began to watch her and Luke. Outwardly there was little change in their friendly relations of the past months but, to my suspicious mind, this meant nothing.

I figured she was getting ready to run away with him.

So it got to be a habit for me to keep an eye on them both. I'd go to the bunkhouse door evenings and look at the light in her room, wondering. . . .

That was how, one night about eleven o'clock, I saw the dim glow that told of a paper or cloth having been placed around the lamp back of the drawn shades. The rest of the house was dark as I slipped out and headed for the hallway, figuring to catch her and Luke getting ready to skip out.

I went in through the back door of the kitchen, opening it cautiously. The floor gave off no sound as my boots threaded their way cautiously through the darkness and eased to a stop just

outside her bedroom door. Voices were whispering from within and I put an ear closer. She was talking and the words sounded a little hysterical. A man's voice answered; roughly, harshly. And it wasn't Luke Osborn's.

Wesley Allen had come back.

CHAPTER XXIV

I BENT still closer to catch their words, and all of a sudden it seemed to me that the walls of the house were being pounded in a sudden storm until I realized the sound came from within my own chest. Lenore was speaking, her voice rising in fear and anger.

"I won't do it, Wes, do you hear? You killed Slim. You shot him down in cold blood. He was my husband and your best friend, and I hate every bone in your body."

"Hurry it up," came his grim voice in reply. "I've got two horses hid up in the timber back of the house. They'll never catch us with the start I'll have. Come on—get into some heavy clothes. It's cold as hell outside.

"I'm not going, do you hear? You killed my husband—"

"Husband?" he sneered back, and I didn't have to see that ugly look on his face. "You don't know what the word means. If I killed him, it was because you made me do it. You're going away with me, right now, because we're two of a kind and you belong to me. You're my woman, and we're getting married as soon as we get back across into Wyoming."

"I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in the world, Wes," she answered back, quite loudly. "I told you that the other three times you slipped in here. I told you not to come back again. Now get out of here before I call Dad. Get out!"

"You just try calling him," Wes Allen said in a voice hard with threat. "Just call him or that overgrown brother of yours and see what happens. You're going out of here with me tonight, Lenore, if I have to kill every man on the place and pack you away by force. Get dressed to ride!"

A hard, spatting sound followed. With it was a cry of pain from Lenore —and then I twisted the doorknob. I hit that room like a range bull on the rampage.

I didn't pause. I caught a brief glimpse of his face, tawny and hard, old Harley's two guns strapped at the hips of his heavy woolen pants beneath a short mackinaw. He half wheeled, wrenching at the pistols.

Had he jerked one gun, he could have shot my head off before I got to him. But he was a two-gun badman now, even to the lead studded, criss-crossed cartridge belts weighting his middle. He tried to use two pistols at once. They came free awkwardly and by then I was on him, bearing him backwards into a corner by sheer weight and driving a sledgehammer fist into his face. The back of his head struck with a muffled thud of his winter cap but he fought back, twisting and cursing, as I pinned one of his hands. I twisted one gun free and threw it, slamming big fisted blows at his snarling, hate contorted countenance.

Then I got him by the throat and began crushing the life out of him, dragging him erect and shaking him like a hound shakes a badger. His hands clawed futily at my wrists. His face changed color and Lenore began to scream. She screamed again for Dad, sleeping across the hall, while Wes Allen went limp and I dragged him over to the bed and knelt with a knee in his chest, my big fingers sunk deep into his neck.

His eyes weren't hard flecked now.

They were popping out. He was dying.

A RUSH of socked feet—Dad always slept in his socks—came from the hallway and I heard Dad yell. He grabbed me from behind, shouting, "Don't do it—don't do it, son!"

He was crowding fifty-six years of age but, despite the heavy drinking after Mom's death, there still was iron in his big frame. Enough that he hauled me, still gripping Wes Allen by the throat, off the bed and wrestled us across the room. I slung him off and drove Wes's limp body against the wall, sinking my fingers deeper and deeper.

He was on me again, wrestling and struggling, from behind. "Luke—Luke!" he roared, still fighting me. "Get down here quick! Jim's killing Wes Allen. Let go, Jim—let go!"

Luke had heard the ruckus and jumped out of bed. He ran in wearing only his trousers. Dad got an iron hard forearm hooked under my chin from behind and began straining backward, trying to break the grip I had on Wes's throat. Luke threw his right shoulder in under Dad's clenched elbow and braced his hands against Wes's chest. He gave a powerful heave, putting all he had into it, and then another. I let go with one hand and flung him half way across the room and then put the hand under the back of Wes's head to hold it while I snapped his neck.

Luke Osborn lowered his head and ran in, butting me along the temple above Dad's straining arm. The shock of pain caused my fingers to loosen enough that when he again put his shoulder beneath my chin and heaved up my grip on Wes Allen's throat finally broke. I reeled off to one side, panting and swallowing convulsively and still filled with murder lust, towering big and gaunt inches above the others in the room. Only then did realization come that, during past months, my great height far overshadowed Dad's tall frame. I was becoming a giant of a man.

Mildred and Ruth stood, nightgowned, in the doorway, Lenore by her bed. Luke was panting and staring. They were all staring. At me.

Dad leaned weakly against the wall, his chest heaving, swallowing in big gulps of air. He was looking up at me and in his eyes was something more than fright; a dawning awe. "Good Godfrey, son!" he finally burst out.

Luke went over and knelt by Wes's limp form on the floor. Ruth's eyes followed him as he felt of Wes's pulse and then she looked at me again.

"You've killed him, Jim," Dad said, hoarsely.

"That's what I figured to do," I answered. "I'd have broken every bone in his body."

"He's not dead," put in Luke. "There's color coming back in his face. But I doubt if he'll be able to twist his head or talk much for awhile. God, Jim—" He didn't finish it.

Quong put in appearance. I noticed that he was fully dressed. He went running for one of his old spinning ropes and a pair of horse hobbles. I bent and hauled Wes off the floor, holding him under one arm.

"How'd it happen?" Dad demanded of Lenore.

"I was sitting up late reading when all of a sudden he just opened the door and slipped in," she said quickly. "I almost screamed when I first saw him. He was trying to make me run away with him. He brought along an extra horse."

She had thought fast, whisking the paper shade off the lamp before the others came in, and I figured there wasn't any use in letting the others know what I knew. I left her to do

the explaining, carrying Wes through the doorway into the hall. A hand touched my arm and Ruth looked up.

"I'll make some coffee for him and bring it down to the bunkhouse, Jim," she said. "I'll be right down as soon as I dress."

"All right, Ruth," I told her and carried Wes's still limp figure out into the night.

THE biting air revived him somewhat but he was too weak to resist while I used the hobbles. His hands kept on rubbing his throat. I drew the big buckles tight around his booted ankles and then went to work with the spinning rope. By the time I got through his arms were trussed snugly at his sides.

"That ought to hold him," I grunted to Quong, stepping back. And: "How come you got up there so fast, fully dressed?"

"I haven't been sleeping much lately either, pardner," he answered simply. And then Luke Osborn came in.

He was dressed for a long cold ride, muffled up in fur cap, mackinaw, and gloves. He looked over at Wes's now sullen face.

"I'll help you take him into town, kid," he announced. "You sure done the county and Lenore a good turn tonight when you accidently caught Wes in the nick of time. I always said—"

"I didn't 'accidently' do any such thing of the kind," I cut in. "I knew for the past two or three weeks that something was wrong with Lenore. I figured, the way you've been playing up to her every time you thought nobody was watching, that she just might be lonesome enough and big enough fool to run away with you. But I should have known her better than that."

He tried to laugh that one off, but it was a pretty miserable effort. "Why, shucks, kid, you mean you've been keeping an eye on her on account of *me*?" His second attempt at a laugh wasn't much better than the first. He said, "The thought never entered my mind. But, anyhow, I'll go in with you to see that he gets tucked away all right."

"You won't do anything of the kind, Luke," I grunted shortly. "You're the gent who wouldn't go after him last summer the night he shot Slim. You said that you're a businessman. Quong and me can take him in. You can follow his tracks back into the timber above the basin and bring down his and the other horse tied up there."

He shrugged. "Okay, Jim, if that's the way you feel about it."

"That's the way I feel about it," I said.

While Quong and I were slipping on outer covering for our boots Ruth came in with a cup of warm, sweetened coffee. She went over to Wes, reclining trussed in a rawhide chair; to the man she once had hoped to lead into the right road by marrying him. I'd have given anything to know what she was thinking just then.

"Here, Wes," she said kindly. "Drink this. It'll make you feel a lot better."

He drank the warm contents of the cup and managed a hoarse, "thanks." She went out. But, at the door, she turned, and again I got that uncomfortable feeling that always came when she looked at me.

Tonight, for the first time, had came the realization that I was turning into a knarled giant different from other men—that only by the grace of God had I missed killing a man with my bare hands.

Luke went out, a little huffily, to go up into the timber after the horses and

Quong and I bundled Wes up in warm blankets, tieing him hard and fast in the back of the light wagon. We set off through the night. It was about midnight now and bitingly cold, but somehow I didn't feel it.

The jogging ponies' hoofs made crunching sounds in the hard packed ruts, vapor spurting and then whisping from their frosty nostrils. One of them blew; slobberingly. Trace chains rattled. Quong sat in silence beside me.

He got down and opened the wire gate, dragging it aside into the softer, surface crusted snow as I drove through. He kicked the snow from his feet, knocking them against the front wheel spokes, and climbed up beside me again.

"Wes'll hang this time," I finally remarked, the silence getting on my nerves.

"He'll go Across . . . on the First Level," he answered simply.

"Yea?" I said, paying close attention to the leather lines. I looked straight ahead.

"That's where all the unbelievers, the murderers—those who take their own lives—make the first stop, pardner. I was there a long time. When he learns to believe, there will be a change."

THAT was all he said and I didn't press him further. Let *him* believe. Personally, I knew only that a dark shadow hanging for months over the Devers family was gone. Wes was going to pay for killing his best friend.

It was almost two o'clock in the morning when I pulled up in front of Andy's front yard. I handed the lines to Quong and went up on the porch, knocking at the front door.

"Hey, Andy!" I called, banging again.

"Yea?" finally came his sleepy bellow from a bedroom. "Who is it?"

"Jim Devers," I shouted back.

"I'll be out in a minute, Jim."

A light went on and presently Andy came into the front room, lamp in hand, in his under drawers, his face sleepy and tousled. He placed the lamp on a table and unlocked the front door. I was shivering.

"Come in, Jim. What's up?"

"We've got Wes Allen out there in the wagon," I said.

"What?"

"He made the ranch about eleven. Slipped in out of the timber to make Lenore run away with him."

"Holy smokes! Is he dead?"

"He's alive," I said grimly.

"Bring him in while I stir up the fire. Is that Quong out there in the wagon? Good. Have him take the team out back and put 'em in the barn. We'll stay right here until morning and not say anything. Some of the boys in town might start getting ideas, if they found out. Slim Holcomb was pretty well liked, I can tell you."

I carried Wes in, not risking removing the hobbles long enough for him to walk. Andy had the coals stirred up in the fireplace and more wood on, down on his hands and knees blowing hard to get the flames started. Quong came in from the barn.

"It's cold outside," he said, removing mittens.

"Probably a good freeze coming up pretty soon," Andy replied, grunting to his feet. "I'll be out in a minute, as soon as I get some clothes on."

We sat by the fire, drinking coffee and talking until just before daybreak. Quong dozed and Wes reclined in a comfortable chair, gazing silently with somber eyes into the fire, his now cuffed hands in his lap. He didn't speak a word. I guess he knew how we all felt about Slim. While it was blackest outside Andy's buxom young

wife got up and cooked breakfast for us.

Wes refused to eat. He asked for coffee and a cigarette. When I handed him the match he leaned back and pulled hard, blowing twin streams of smoke from his nostrils. His opaque gaze went back to the fire.

We jogged out of Montrose in the wagon just as broad daylight broke, the rested, freshly fed team making the eight miles to Hoogan in pretty good time. The sun was up and warming the glittering white land when, with Ed Baker in the wagon, I hauled up in front of the county jail. Ed hadn't asked any questions. He got down heavily and took the big iron key from his pocket and unlocked the steel outer door. Quong and I helped Wes, still hobbled, inside, not risking his making a break. Given half a chance, he'd have snatched a gun and shot us all down.

"So you finally got him?" Ed Baker said to Andy, unlocking a cell door.

"I didn't," Andy replied. "Jim here did when Wes sneaked in at the Devers ranch about eleven last night."

"Well, I'm sure glad. But then they say that the wolf always comes back to his stamping grounds. I'm awfully sorry, Wes, that it had to turn out this way."

"Don't bother at all, Ed," Wes Allen said hoarsely. "You haven't hung me yet."

"I hope I don't have to, son. Put him in, boys."

We got him in and Andy unlocked the handcuffs. Wes rubbed his wrists for a moment and then bent to unbuckle the horse hobbles. I stood back, a little wary. He straightened and handed them to me, grinning sourly. "I ain't going to knock you down with them, Jim."

"I know you ain't," I said.

He sat down on a bunk filled with blankets, rubbing his wrists again.

"Well, I guess that takes care of that," Andy Calders commented. "You ought to be able to handle him now Ed."

"I'll handle him all right," Ed Baker nodded, striking a match to his pipe.

"You think that maybe some of the boys might—well, you know. Rope stuff?"

"I'll handle him all right," the sheriff repeated, puffing complacently.

CHAPTER 25

THE capture of Wes Allen caused quite a stir around town for a few days, with a few rumbling threats, which was about as far as things went. People knew Ed Baker too well. He'd been county sheriff since back in the days when old Harley Role had finally lost his office because of too much whiskey. Any attempt to remove even a man like Wes would have ended in more bloodshed.

I heard a few rumors of Wes boasting in his cell that friends in Wyoming would never let him swing, but these rumors were mostly secondhand, for I was sticking pretty close to the ranch. Things had changed. I was no longer Ed Devers' overgrown kid. It was big Jim now, the man who had used two hands against two guns and fought it out with the toughest man the county had produced in fifteen years. And the fight had grown with retelling until even Andy got to recounting how it had taken Dad, Quong, and Luke, aided by three women, to break my hold on Wes Allen's throat that night.

So I dug in on the last of the winter work, trying to avoid everybody except Quong, and seldom going up to the big house anymore. We had a dirt dam across the lower end of the creek as insurance against dry seasons and also

to furnish summer ice; and Quong and I worked alone, pumping the big saw up and down in long cuts that brought out gleaming white blocks three feet in depth. These we loaded on a hay rick and hauled to the big log icehouse and packed them in layers of sawdust. A couple of times Mildred caught us as we passed the kitchen door and made us come in for coffee and something to eat from the cupboard. I felt ill at ease and out of place now in the house where I was born and Mom had died. For going on two years I'd thought only of getting the Devers family back together again and holding the ranch until Dad could take over as head of the family once more.

But the fight with Wes Allen had changed all that. The Devers family *was* a family, as contented as any people could be, but Dad apparently harbored little thought of taking his old place again. He left the affairs of the ranch strictly in my hands. Now and then he dropped a hint, as spring came on, that I'd ought to move up to the house with the rest of the family, that the girls were complaining about having to go to dances alone, except for Luke.

So one warm day in the spring I told him that as soon as Wes Allen's trial was over I was leaving. My days of living in the house were gone. I didn't belong anymore.

We were riding back across the basin from one of the few remaining hay stacks, fence tools on our saddles. The cows had broken through and spoiled a lot of good hay. All about us lay wet slush, little streams of icy water trickling toward the belly swollen shallow creek.

"We've come through in pretty good shape this winter," I explained. "There's only four hides in the harness shed out of those twenty-five head you and Luke bought. And some of the others are going to drop spring calves. You can handle things all right."

HE DIDN'T say anything for a bit, jogging along with both hands resting on the saddle horn. "It wouldn't be on account of Ruth, would it, son?" he finally asked.

"Hell no!" I exploded, feeling the red rise to my face. "What'n the blazes ever gave you that idea?"

"I just wondered. Seems like you've done a pretty good job of keeping out of her way lately. She's half afraid of you, Jim."

I wouldn't admit it, but it was the other way around. I was half afraid of her.

"Then how come you're leaving, Jim?"

"I dunno, Dad. Just getting restless, I guess. I was born on this place and I've never been out of the state. I haven't been a hundred miles out of the county. Quong has dropped a hint or two that maybe someday he'd like to go to Seattle and San Francisco. I got a hunch that he's hoping to see something there that'll jog his memory and help him remember where he came from. We could go together."

"I see," he said, and rode on in silence for awhile.

We crossed one of the creek's tenacles, the horses leaping to clear the icy water. Mud and slush went flying from their hoofs. A chill breeze was blowing from the north. He twisted in the saddle and lit a match under the flap of his coat, bending down. Smoke from the cigarette lifted around his collar, was gone.

"I was hoping you'd always want to stay on here, son," he remarked, as we neared the corrals. "It's a good ranch —there's none better in Montana. And some day it will all be yours. It is now, for that matter."

"There's no reason for me to stay. Things are running good—"

"Things," he cut in bluntly, "are not running good. I'm in trouble, Jim. Oh, Mildred nor the girls haven't noticed it yet, and they aren't going to find out. Not if there's any way to keep them from knowing. It's Luke, son."

"Luke?" I queried blankly. "If you mean you're tired of him living in the house—"

"He's pressing me for some IOU's that I signed in his place in town. Gambling last fall. And I can't pay."

My gorge began to rise. "I can do something about *that,*" I muttered angrily.

He reined over sharply, knee to knee, reaching out a hand to my arm. "Oh, no you don't, Jim! Nothing like that. I saw you go on a rampage just once, and I hope to God that never again will these eyes of mine have to watch you going in after another man to kill him."

"He's got it coming," I said harshly.

"You'd twist the life out of his body with those iron hands of yours and end up with Wes over at the county seat, on trial for your own life. Promise me one thing right now, son: that you'll never go after Luke Osborn."

"All right, if that's the way you want it. But it's about time he got the devil off the ranch. He's been hanging around Lenore long enough."

Luke had come out into the open of late. He had sold his domino gambling place to John Barker, who had closed it—though I wasn't to learn until a long time afterward that Quong's money swung the deal. Luke, his store booming, was turning "respectable."

"He asked me a couple of days ago if I had any objections to him marrying her," Dad added, almost casually.

I looked at him, startled. "What did you tell him?" I shot back.

"I said that Lenore will make her own decisions. I said I wouldn't stand in the way, if that was what she wanted, but that I damned sure wasn't encouraging any such marriage."

"So now he's pressing you for the money? He knows that an IOU note signed for gambling actually wouldn't hold up in court, but he also knows that a Devers won't welch. So he's putting on pressure on account of Lenore?"

He shrugged his bony shoulders. "That's about the size of it, Jim."

We pulled up in front of the corral gate and swung down in the slippery mud. I opened the gate. "How much, Dad?" I asked as he led his horse through. "How much is Luke holding against you?"

"Three thousand. But I squared up five hundred of it this morning."

"How?" I demanded, suspiciously.

"He was pressing me, son, and I was afraid he might start hinting to the family. I had to do it."

"How?" I snapped.

"I took back one of the notes for five hundred and gave him Quong's blue mule. Susie belongs to Luke Osborn now, Jim."

"Holy mother!" I cried out.

I UNSADDLED and strode down to the bunkhouse, ready to boil over. I was half mad at Dad and half sorry for him. Luke had been clever, dropping hints to Dad about letting the family learn of those notes. He knew how happy Dad was with Mildred looking after him and bundling him up from the cold every time he left the house, and of the pleasure my father got from romping with the two girls. It was no small wonder that Dad had forgotten those "big deals." He had been too contented to think of them.

Quong was busy over the bunkhouse stove when I went inside. He turned as I came in and sat down on the bench,

my back to the long table.

"Hi, Jim," he grinned. "There's some coffee on the stove. I just made a pot."

"I don't want any," I grunted. "Quong, Dad has sold Susie to Luke Osborn. She's his saddle mule now."

I expected him to hit the roof—anything to show some signs of the rage that I felt. He did nothing. He took off a stove lid, stirred the bubbling stew, and shifted the pot over the opening. The cast iron lid clattered as it slipped and rolled across the floor.

"Well?" I demanded. "Didn't Dad tell you?"

He turned, straightening above the hot lid lying upturned at his booted feet. "I guess he didn't have the heart, pardner. Luke informed me about an hour ago, grinning what you've always called a fishy grin. But I fear I disappointed him."

"What did you tell him?"

He flipped the lid over, hooked the handle into the recess, and carried it to the back of the stove. "I told him that Susie really belonged to Mr. Devers that that it was his right to sell her. Luke says he's leaving her on the ranch for the present. I suppose that would be his idea of baiting a man he hated from the very beginning."

"You could get him in a game tonight and clean him out. You could get her back in an hour. You and Bill and me can start a game and then we'll drop out and let you take him at cut throat."

He came over, wiping his hands on his apron, seating himself on the bench beside me. He shook his head. "I can't do it, Jim. Don't ask me why—I told you the reason months ago. But I have the strange feeling that something terrible is about to happen. I have weird dreams at night and the back of my head has begun to hurt. Please don't ask me to do it, Jim. I'm trying so hard to find an answer to so many things, and if I don't find one I'm a doomed man." He smiled and the smile lit up the sincerity in his intelligent face. "But we're still pardners, aren't we?"

I stood up, slapping him on the shoulder. "You can bet your last bottom dollar on that, old timer. And now—have you got twenty-four hundred dollars on you?"

"That and much more."

"Am I good for it?"

His answer was to rise and open the front of his black silk shirt. He brought out four gold notes of five hundred dollar denomination and slip his fingers inside once more, handing me four of one hundred each.

I put the money into my pocket and went up to the kitchen. Lenore and Ruth were there, preparing supper. It was the first time in nearly two weeks that I'd been in the house.

"Well!" Lenore cried out gaily. "There's a stranger here. Don't straighten those big shoulders of yours or you'll bump your head against the ceiling."

"Seen Luke around?" I asked carelessly, hoping that Dad was still over at the corral.

"He's upstairs shaving, Jim," Ruth replied. "He came down a few minutes ago to get some hot water."

I HEADED for the hall stairs and met Mildred. She put up her arms and I bent down and kissed her on the cheek. She raised her face, arms clasped under my armpits, I was of such height. "Jim, what's happened that you don't care for us anymore? Have we done anything?"

"Nothing except make an awfully happy family around here. I've just been busy around the ranch, that's all."

She hugged me hard, head buried

against my chest. "Jim—Big Jim!" she murmured softly. "You're so big and awkward and clean—and iron all the way through. You're all man now, every pound of you, and if I'd ever had a son I would have wanted him to be just like you. This ranch was blessed the day Big Jim Devers was born."

Lenore's indignant voice came from the kitchen. "Now just look at that, will you, Ruth? The big lummox goes around kissing his step-mother but dodges his two sisters like a scared coyote. Just you wait—one of these nights we'll catch him asleep in the house and pin him in the sheets."

"I have the feeling," Ruth's gentle voice came in low reply, as I went up the stairs, "that Jim will never sleep in this house again. He doesn't belong to the family anymore, Lenore. He belongs to himself now."

I moved along the hallway and knocked on the door of Luke's room. Two years had passed since I'd been in that room.

"Come in—and I hope it's Lenore."

"Not this time, Luke," I said, stepping through and closing the door.

He turned, shirt off, scissors in hand, bent forward close to the mirror while he trimmed the lower edges of his long blond mustache. "Oh. . . . hello, kid," he said a little confusedly. "I thought I was teasing Lenore. It's a sort of game between us when she knocks to call me down to meals."

I pulled out the money, spreading the bills fanwise on the dresser, in order for him to see the amount.

"Luke, I want those twenty-five hundred in notes of Dad's that you're holding," I said bluntly.

CHAPTER 26

"NOTES?" he asked blankly. "What notes?"

"Cut out the stalling, Luke. Dad told me about them an hour ago, and about the deal on Susie. Give me the notes."

"So you went right down and got the money from Quong, eh?" he grinned.

"That's right. You're paying a high price for that shoddy deal on Susie. You didn't want her. You wouldn't be seen riding her for a hundred dollars. You just hated Quong. Well, he's paying you back with interest. It's his money that's breaking your hold on Dad. Hand over, Luke."

He laid down the scissors and brushed at a fleck of powder on his new shaven jaw, concentrating his attention on the mirror. "Why, shucks, Jim, you needn't have gone to all that trouble. There's no call to hurry. I'm not pressing him. I've got scads of money. That store of mine is really rolling up profits. I'm going to loan Ed some more to help restock the ranch."

"There's twenty-four hundred there on the dresser in front of you. Dad owns half of those twenty-one head of broken down cows we managed to pull through the winter. I'm selling you his half of them for ten dollars a head. That makes twenty-five hundred to cover the notes, with one extra cow thrown in for interest. Give me those IOU's, Luke. I'm not going to ask you again," I warned him.

"Jim, I sure hate to have you feel this way, for Ed's sake," he said with a sorrowful shake of the head. "You're just setting him back a few years when he's too old to be set back. Come warmer weather and the grass gets green, we're going to start things humming. Scads of feed out here for more stockers, that big store of mine in town for supplies—and all maybe in the family, Jim."

I straightened, getting that tight

feeling in the pit of my stomach. It had been in the night Wes Allen and I fought it out in Lenore's room. "Better leave her out of it, Luke," I said. "She'll never marry you—even if I have to break my promise to Dad not to kill you over these notes you won on crooked deals."

That fishy grin began to take shape under the long silky mustache. "Yes? Perhaps she feels differently, Jim. I don't say she does or not I just say—now look out, Jim!" he warned, backing away. "I can only be pushed so far."

"See these, Luke?" I whispered, holding up two hands so big I was almost ashamed of them at the family table. "That gun in your coat pocket on the bed won't do you any good. You've got about a half minute to hand over the notes or I'm going to bend you back across that bed like I did Wes Allen. And this time Lenore won't be around to call for help."

He shrugged and reached for a hip pocket, bringing out the fat snap purse. He took five slips of white paper and tossed them down beside the money, half angrily picking it up and stuffing the gold notes between leather. I backed out of his reach and scanned the notes. Five of them for five hundred apiece. Dad and Luke must have been hitting the high pots in some of those games.

I burned the notes in a little pile on the floor grinding the ashes beneath a boot sole. I straightened and looked at him. He was buttoning a clean white shirt reflecting staring back petulantly from the mirror.

"And now Luke," I added, turning with my hand on the door knob, "I think you'd better tell Mildred that business in the store is causing you to move back to town. I just don't want you hanging around the ranch."

He grunted and I went out, feeling a lot better.

HE DIDN'T move back to town. Dad came to me the next morning, grinning. "I just went down and shook hands with Quong, son. I figured that a sure owed him an apology all these years for that 'ten dolla' business the morning he showed up at the ranch with Susie. And all the time he was an educated sonuvagun who could have bought the ranch, lock, stock, and barrel. Have you known all along about him packing that pile of money Luke saw?"

"Sure," I said carelessly. "I told you Quong and me are pardners."

"Well, he sure fooled me, son. I admit it. By the way, I notice he's been slipping away a Sunday or two."

"He usually goes in to see old Ching, particularly since the old gent is down sick now."

Dad shook his head. We were in the meat house. I was cutting down a smoked ham bought in town.

"Ed Baker said last week that Quong has been visiting Wes," Dad added. "And damned if I don't hear that Wes is turning religious. Reads a Bible all the time that Johnny Barker sent over."

"How is Wes?" I asked, coming out with the meat, and wondering why Quong hadn't said anything about his trips to Hoogan.

"Ed says he's changed quite a bit. Jokes a lot with the two deputies who're guarding him day and night."

I was glad about that, but I didn't want to talk about Wes anymore. His trial was coming up the first of May and I dreaded the ordeal of having to testify. Wes was, it seemed certain, going to hang.

I changed the subject and asked Dad when Luke was going to pack up and get off the ranch. We were walking

down past the garden fence.

"I told Mildred and the girls that he might as well stay around another couple of weeks," he answered. "It's not that I like him as much as I once did. My eyes are open now, son. But since I built this ranch long before you were born any man has been welcome here to share what we have as long as he wanted to stay."

I let out a disgruntled snort. "There's a limit to hospitality. He'll either get off or I'm going to throw him off."

"Just let things ride until after the trial, son. Then we'll see what happens."

"All right," I grunted. "Quong'll bring up part of this ham to the kitchen as soon as he cut's it in two."

I went on down to the bunkhouse and it seemed no time at all until Wes's trial opened one Monday morning. We all left the ranch at daylight that morning, driving in two buggies. Dad, Lenore, and Mildred drove up ahead. Quong and I followed in the second buggy, with Ruth sitting between us; and that part of the arrangement had been Dad's. He'd tried hard to be very casual about it.

Luke Osborn jogged along with us astride one of his blooded bays. He hadn't spoken a word to me since the day when I paid off the notes in his room at the ranch.

The air across the greening country still was crisp but new grass was coming up everywhere. It was going to be a fine year for hay in the basin and for grazing up in the higher country among the timber.

Ruth finally broke a long silence. "Poor Wes," she said. "I feel so sorry for him, Jim."

"I guess I do too, in a way," I answered, paying close attention to the lines. Quong didn't say anything, and I thought of those visits he had made with Wes.

"It's such a pity that Wes couldn't have found out about God a little sooner," Ruth commented in her gentle way. "I pray for him every night," she added simply.

"It's sure too bad," I agreed. "I can remember old Wes around the ranch quite a while ago. He laughed all the time, and him and Slim were always playing jokes on each other. They used to lay awake nights waiting for Quong to go to sleep so they could tie knots in his pants. But Quong fooled 'em. He'd get back into his bunk and untie the knots under the covers."

We all burst out laughing and just as quickly subsided again. I flicked the team on the rump with the buggy whip and drove on.

THE town was jammed with a hundred buggies and wagons and saddled ponies when we drove in. It was the biggest trial in years. We put the buggies out back of the post office and tied the ponies to a tree. People nodded and spoke as we passed, hands touching big hats as Mildred and the girls nodded back. We headed across the square for the two-story brick courthouse.

At the entrance Bob Johnston, cowhide satchel under an arm, came over and shook hands. He looked old with his rather long grey locks pushing out from beneath the battered Stetson, but there was shrewdness written in every line of his freshly shaven face.

"How's Wes doing, Bob?" Dad asked.

Bob Johnston pulled at the dewlap under his chin and a little twinkle came into his sharp eyes. "He's not afraid, Ed. In many ways Wes has good character. He's changed much during

the months of his confinement. I'm hoping to impress that fact in the minds of the jury."

"Has he any chance at all, Bob?" Mildred put in, anxiously.

She didn't mean a chance to go free. She was hoping that Wes wouldn't hang.

"We'll do our best, Mrs. Devers," the lawyer answered. "Well, we'd better get upstairs. I've got seats reserved for all of you near the counsel table. We'll do our best."

The courtroom was packed, people even standing in the hallway that led straight back from the double doors to the stairway. Two deputies opened a path for us into a sea of people in low, humming conversation. We took our seats up near the rail and pretty soon Ed Baker brought Wes in, hands shackled and in leg irons. Two pistol carrying deputies held him by the arms, Ed bringing up the rear with a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun, loaded with buckshot, cradled across his fat chest.

I was somewhat astonished at the change in Wes. That hard, ugly look that I had come to associate with him was gone. Months in jail without any liquor, and the religion too, I guess, had brought back a lot of the Wes Allen of old. His hair was freshly cut and combed, his clothes neat in spite of the shackles. He looked ready for a dance in Montrose, and I wondered if this gentle looking, changed Wes was the real man or a part of old Bob's strategy to impress the jury. Wes Allen certainly didn't look like a killer that morning.

He sat down at Bob's table, nodding a friendly greeting to us over the rail. "Hello, Ed, Mildred. How are you, Jim?"

His eyes, when they looked into Ruth's, turned away almost quickly. He spoke to Luke, friendly like.

The opposing lawyers got settled and presently the trial was getting under way, with cagey old Bob and the District Attorney sparring over the selection of jurors. Bob already had lost the first round, weeks before, in attempting to get the case tried in another county, where feeling against Wes wasn't running so high. However, by noon the twelve ranchers were sworn in and the first witnesses were called. By late that afternoon most of us from the ranch had been on the witness stand. We all stayed at the hotel that night and went back the next morning to begin another day of sitting and listening.

At two o'clock Wednesday afternoon Bob Johnston made his final, impassioned plea to the jury and sat down again, exhausted and wiping sweat from his tired face as the twelve received instructions from the judge before filing out. We remained in our chairs; not a person left the room. Eighteen minutes later the jury filed back and took their seats.

AT TWO-THIRTY, less than three days after the trial had opened, Wes Allen stood up in his leg irons and heard himself sentenced to be hanged for the murder of Edgar Holcomb. Execution was set for the third Friday in May.

Two weeks, I thought. Wes Allen had a little over two weeks of life left in which to read his Bible in his cell. He looked at Quong's impassive face. A signal?

Mildred leaned across the rail and her face was paler than I'd ever seen it. Her voice was low, broken in the hum of the crowd. "Wes . . . I'm sorry. Oh, Wes, I'm sorry . . ."

"Don't be," he said, patting her hand with his shackled one "I'm sorta glad, Mildred. I'm going Over on the Other Side to square up things with old Slim. I got a hunch he'll be glad to see me."

So that explained Quong's visits to Wes, I thought. A man turned killer had been turned back to his Faith by a strange Chinese who had come out of nowhere, his own present life a complete blank; and suddenly a picture came into my mind of Mom sitting in a chair by the big fireplace, Lenore and me at her knees, listening as she read her favorite passages from the Bible. *God works in many ways* . . . I couldn't remember how the exact wording was.

We all left the courtroom and got the teams from the livery. We were pretty silent on the drive back to the ranch, getting in a little after dark. Bill came out to help Quong and myself unharness.

Luke Osborn hadn't come back with us. He had ridden on to Montrose and would send out a rig for his belongings. We were rid of his presence on the ranch and I felt a lot better.

Hard rains set in for a few days and then real warm weather broke. On the morning set for Wes's execution Dad, Quong, and myself rode over on horseback. It wasn't morbid curiosity that impelled me to make the ride. I remembered how Ruth had prayed for him that night on her father's grave and how she still was saying a prayer for his soul each evening when she went to bed. I felt that if she could feel that way after what Wes had done and Wes himself could undergo such a remarkable change, then the least I could do was to let him know that I was pulling for him.

"How come you didn't tell me about going over to see Wes last winter, old timer?" I queried of Quong on the ride over, while we waited for Dad, who had ridden off to one side for a couple of minutes.

He flicked a leg up around the saddle horn and idly spun a spur rowel. He wore spurs all the time now on account of Luke Osborn owning Susie and him not riding her anymore.

"I was afraid you wouldn't understand, Jim, feeling about him like you did," he answered softly. "I'm glad you feel differently now."

"I saw that strange look he gave you in the courtroom right after they sentenced him. I sort of half way figured he was telling you that see, there wasn't anything to this faith business after all. It didn't keep him from hanging."

He looked at me and smiled. "You have very sharp eyes, pardner. Wes was merely telling me that he was on his way Across, as he figured, and that he'd try to get in touch with me after leaving."

This was a new one on me; I'd never heard of such fool things. I was glad that about then Dad came loping back and we resumed our trip.

There was a pretty good crowd of people in and around the jail yard when we jogged over. A lot of others stood watching from vantage points a hundred yards distant. Ed Baker had built thirteen steps up the new scaffold of raw white pine and was making a final test of the trap door with a sand filled burlap sack. It worked but the sack burst and splashed sand over the ground below. He pulled up the rope again and readjusted the hangman's knot. It swung and twisted from the eight inch cross piece, although there was no breeze.

Twelve heavily armed deputies, rifles slung over their arms, were strung in a circle around the jail yard, making sure that Wes wouldn't try a last minute break. Fast horses stood saddled nearby, guarded by two bepistoled men. I saw Andy Calders, who came over and nodded a greeting.

Ed came around the corner of the jail to the front and walked over. He

came up and spoke. I noted, over his head, that Joe Hodge and his riders sat their horses not far away. Joe's pipe seemed dead in his fat fingers.

"How much longer, Ed?" Dad asked the sheriff.

Baker pulled out a big silver watch and glanced at the hands beneath the massive crystal. "Fourteen minutes more. You boys got here just in time."

"If you don't mind, Ed," I said slowly, "I'd like to say a last word to Wes."

CHAPTER XXVII

DAD shot me a quick look, surprise on his bony face. I had refused to do any talking about Wes since the night of the fight in Lenore's room, and Dad must have figured that I hated Wes Allen as of old.

Ed Baker said, "Why, sure, Jim if you want to. Say . . . you made a pretty good witness on the stand this time. A dog-goned lot better than the first time Wes was tried for murder. My left side was sore for a week after me and old Andy wrestled you all over the courtroom that morning, pulling you off that prosecutor. I'll bet you didn't cry when he got his pants beat off at the last election."

"Coming along, Quong?" I asked, as Ed started for the jail door.

He shook his head. "You go ahead, Jim. Say goodbye for me, will you?"

Ed knocked on the steel door and the unarmed deputy inside unlocked it. I went in. Wes was alone in a cell, two husky men without weapons sitting in chairs on either side of the steel barred door. Three other prisoners, minor offenders, had been removed. They were over in the courtroom, under guard, watching from an upper window.

Wes saw me and got up off his bunk, laying down his Bible. He came over and stuck a hand out through the perpendicular bars.

"Hello, Jim," he greeted warmly. "How's things going?"

"Well, all right, Wes," I said awkwardly. "Feed looks pretty good this year, though we're not running many head. About a hundred and sixty. We might buy some more stockers."

"That's fine. I always did say that's the best ranch in Montana. You've done a good job running it too the past couple of years. All growed up now, huh? Great Scott, Jim, aren't you *ever* going to stop growing?"

"Well, I sure hope so, Wes," I replied seriously.

He laughed, warm and rich. "How tall are you now? How much do you weigh?"

"I'm six feet four in my socks. I weigh around two hundred and fifteen pounds now, I guess."

"Holy smokes! No wonder they call you Big Jim Devers now. And as long as things . . . turned out this way, I just want you to know that I'm glad it was you and not some other man who got me back on the right road again. You've been on the right road all your life, Jim. It was born in you. And some day you'll be a big man in this county."

I wanted to glance around for a look at a clock, knowing the minutes were ticking away; flying toward the end of Wes Allen's short life. Wes, however, didn't appear to notice. He shook his head when I told him that I wasn't going to stay on the ranch; that maybe Quong and I would be leaving in a couple of weeks.

"Quong will never leave, Jim," he said. "His life is here. Don't look surprised. He has told me about the past. If I have any salvation coming for my sins—if I get Over to hunt up Slim and square up with him—I'll owe

it to Quong. Him and that Book there on the bunk. Funny," he smiled, "how a lot of things a man never bothered about can all of a sudden come into a man's soul."

He asked about Lenore and Ruth and the others, and I lost some of the tightness in my stomach. It came back again as Ed Baker, a tumbler filled with whiskey, came over.

"Well, I guess it's about time, Wes," he said gruffily. "You better drink this, son. It'll help a lot."

WES shook his head, smiling. "I don't need it, Ed. Thanks. You drink it. Well, so long, Jim, and good luck."

"Good luck, Wes," I said shaking hands with him again through the bars. "And, Wes, I just wanted to tell you that Ruth has been praying for you all this time . . . every night. That's why I rode over."

"Thanks a hundred times, Jim. That's sure going to make it that much easier."

"We'll get it over as quickly as possible for you, Wes," Ed Baker said, nodding to the two men to unlock the door. He placed the big tumbler of whiskey on the desk as the two silent, tight lipped men went in and pinioned Wes Allen's arms behind his back. One of them took out handcuffs.

"Just a minute, boys. I almost forgot something," Wes asked. He picked up his Bible, opened it to a well thumbed page, read briefly, then closed it and put it to his lips.

I turned and went out as they snapped the cuffs around his wrists. Dad and Quong and Andy Calders were still out front. In the distance Joe Hodge appeared not to have moved, dead pipe clenched between the fingers of one hand. Ike McCauley had moved in and reined up beside him. The crowd was silent, the sun beating hard against the east wall of the red brick jail, back of which shone the new scaffold with its still twisting rope. There wasn't a breath of air anyplace.

Wes came out of the front door, arms gripped by the two silent deputies, looking almost diminutive between them. A man shifted his Winchester to the other arm and cleared his throat. Andy stirred beside me as Wes was led around the corner of the jail.

"He's sure not afraid, is he?" he muttered.

"He's not afraid," I said. "By the way, where's Luke Osborn? How come he didn't ride over?"

"Said nope, he didn't have any grudge against Wes now and didn't want to watch him getting hung."

We followed around to the jail yard. They were walking Wes up the thirteen new steps, getting it over for him in a hurry, as Ed had promised. Wes's black shirt was open at the throat and his neatly combed blonde hair shone. On the ground close by the scafforld was a long box, also of raw white pine. Beside it stood a man in a hard case derby hat, black bag in hand. A doctor appointed by the state.

Ed Baker was down below too, standing beside the lever that would spring the trap, and I stole a glance at Quong beside me. His almond eyes were impassive. His black silk shirt shone in the white sun, and it came to me with something of a start that the one Wes Allen wore was of black silk too!

The two men quickly adjusted the noose around Wes's neck, snugging the hangman knot up under his left ear and just back of it. Then one of them slipped over the black hood, tying it with noose strings.

Wes stood motionless, hands cuffed behind his back, as they slipped a strap around his ankles and drew his feet

closer together. They straightened, one stepped back. The second bent over.

"Anything you'd like to say, Wes?" he asked in a low voice.

"Just say to Ed and Big Jim Devers and the others that we're all square, and that I'll make my peace with Slim when I get across to the Other Side. That's all, boys."

The deputy stepped clear, looked down and gave a quick nod to Ed Baker standing with his hand on the trip lever. The sheriff jerked it . . . hard. Wes's black headed body went swallowing down through the jaws of the trap and the new rope gave off a singing sound as Wes's own rope had sung when he roped a steer on the Devers ranch.

Wesley Allen was on his way Across to make his peace with his best friend, Slim Holcomb, and I wondered with a queer feeling in my heart what Joe Docker would say if there was some way provided for him to be present.

WE MADE a fast trip back to the ranch, leaving Andy with a final wave of the hand as he took the fork of the road that led to Montrose. It was shortly after noon when we rode up. Dad and Quong went over to unsaddle as I dismounted by the kitchen door. Mildred and Ruth came out.

Ruth had been crying and Mildred looked agitated. I thought it was on account of Wes.

Then Ruth ran to me and burst out, "Jim, Jim, something terrible has happened! It's Lenore."

"What about her?" I demanded, fearing that she . . .

"She ran away with Luke Osborn to get married!" cried Mildred.

I felt my face blanch. Luke had been too clever for us after all. Now I knew why he hadn't gone to the hanging. He had bided his time, waiting until we all were away from the ranch.

"When?" I shouted.

"Just a little while ago. He drove out for her in a rig, not expecting you menfolk back until about dark. They just left on the west road, through the timber. They're not two miles away."

I made a run for the horse, yelling for Quong to saddle Susie. Then Mildred came to me as I swung up.

"Tell me, Jim. Did . . . did he—"

"He was all man to the last, Mildred," I answered, looking down at her sweet face. "He just found it out too late, I reckon."

"Poor Wes—and poor Slim," she half sighed.

I loped over to the corral and told Dad about Lenore running away with Luke Osborn. Somehow I couldn't find in my heart any anger toward her. She had been on the ranch for quite awhile now, except for an occasional dance in town that she didn't enjoy as of old, and she was lonesome for something that life on the ranch couldn't offer. Lenore had been born to be loved by men, but she had been born to find her love amid tragedy.

She had run away and married Slim the night Wes Allen killed Joe Docker.

She was running away with Luke on the day Wes was hanged.

That, I knew now, was another bit of Luke's cleverness. He had figured that Lenore might not want to face Dad and me after the hanging, knowing she was responsible for it. All during his stay at the ranch Luke Osborn had been preying on her mind; teasing her, watching her, making her aware of his male presence by a hundred little things unnoticed by the others. And now it had borne fruit. He had her.

Dad didn't say anything or run for his saddle when I told him. He stood leaning with a booted foot resting

against the fence as I went into the horse corral with my rope. There was a big roan four years old that I'd been riding a lot because he was larger than the others and could carry my more than two hundred pounds of weight with ease. As I mounted him and rode out Dad stepped up.

"Just a reminder, son," he said quietly. "Remember your promise about Luke."

"That's why I'm not packing a gun," I answered. "I'm not forgetting."

"Good. And . . . Jim . . . I never went much for putting things into words, but you've growed up to be just more than all Devers. You're all man too, son. Now get out of here and go after him!"

I looked down from the saddle and nodded as he turned away, and damned if it wasn't because he didn't want me to maybe see what was in his eyes. Quong jogged up on Susie and we set off.

WE WENT up the west slope back of the house and took the road at a long swinging lope that would eat up the miles. Susie's mule hoofs hit the ground beside the roan in sharp, almost stiff legged stride, long ears straight up. She carried Quong's hundred and forty pounds without effort. She and the roan got warmed to their work and we lengthened out. Luke would be trotting his team fast but with only a two mile start I figured it wouldn't take us long to overhaul them.

I was more worried because of my promise to Dad and the knowledge that he would be carrying a gun.

We covered the first two miles, loping and jogging by turns, letting the saddle mounts keep their wind. The tracks were easy to follow along the dim road. They were heading for the next county seat, some forty miles away. I could tell by the prints in the dirt that Luke was hitting the span along at a pretty good clip.

Three and a half miles from the ranch we loped up a gentle incline, topped it, and then I saw them about a mile away. We put on speed and began to close in. I was sure of the quarry now.

They were together in the front seat and both turned to look back, as they seemed to have been doing all along. Luke twisted forward again and put the whip to his ponies, sending them into a lope. We drove down upon them the harder and closed up the gap some more. I raised up in the saddle and let out a yell for them to halt.

Luke Osborn lost his head then. He swung the team hard to the left and hit into the timber, foolishly forgetting that we easily could follow the tracks. Or perhaps he planned to make a stand against us with his gun. He leathered the team into a run, the rig bouncing wildly.

I let out another yell and bent forward in the saddle, slashing the roan in the flanks with the reins. It settled down into a dead run and Quong on Susie fell behind. For three hundred yards I flattened him out, driving dull steel into his sides and getting out all there was in his big frame. We closed in and Luke swung off again, this time around the sloping side of a green hummock. I caught a brief glimpse of a dust flash and in it a flurry of four wheels in the air, rolling over and over as the tongue splintered and the team went down.

I pulled the sweat drenched, heaving roan to a halt and hit the ground, running. The rig had rolled over twice. One of the horses was still down, twisted around and facing the seat. The other stood trembling and blowing in a tangle of harness. Luke Osborn lay thirty feet away, close up by a big fir tree, grunting and trying to get up.

Only Lenore's high heeled shoes were visible beneath the upturned light wagon.

Quong came up on a run as I went over. I bent and got hold of the wagon with both hands, straightening with a heave that seemed to pull loose all the muscles in my gaunt shoulders. I lifted the front end of the wagon clear of her and Quong got hold of her ankles. She screamed once and fainted with a low moan as he dragged her from under it into the clear.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SHE lay on her back, an arm outflung, and, except for the blood all over the left side of her face, might have been sleeping. The top of the seat probably had struck her, breaking the cheek bone. Quong knelt beside her, his face whiter than I had ever seen it.

"It was all my fault, all mine," he said aloud, to himself. "It was all my fault."

"What do you mean—it was your fault?" I demanded.

He raised his eyes to mine. "Because I knew long ago something violent was coming. I saw it once before."

"You're dreaming," I half snorted, filled with fear and trepidation for her and in no mood at the moment to listen to his crazy ideas.

He rose to his feet, dusting his knees. "No dream, pardner. This didn't happen today. It happened exactly the same—two thousand years ago."

"The hell with all that, Quong! Get on Susie and burn the breeze back to the ranch. Send Dad out with a rig and then saddle a fresh horse and go for the doctor in Montrose."

"I wont need a fresh horse. Susie was born for this job. That is what led me to her that day, Jim. Well . . . I'll go."

He went to her and swung up, saddle leather creaking. He reined her around and set off, tearing out of there fast, and I noted that, this time, his spurs were raking her almost savagely. He drove her into the ranch, pausing just long enough to break the news, and then went on across the basin at a hard run. He was still gigging her hard when, covered with lather, she fell dead with him almost in front of Andy Calders' saloon.

Quong had run her down and killed her on her feet.

As soon as he was gone I knelt beside Lenore again. She was still bleeding a little at the cheek, but I wasn't too worried about that. Her left ankle didn't look right. I ripped open her dress. Red was trickling from under the leg of her bloomers. It tore it all the way up to the thigh, turning sick all over at the sight of the bone sticking out of a ghastly looking mess of blood and blue flesh. She was bleeding to death.

I jerked off my shirt and tore it apart, going to work the best I knew how. Luke had propped himself up against the tree bole, grunting, his face grey with pain.

"How is she?" he groaned as I ran for a sapling and began trimming it with a knife. The bandages apparently had stopped the flow of blood somewhat.

"Damn bad. How are you feeling?"

"My right leg is broke just below the hip," he grunted. "I wish I could help you but I can't move."

"I'll make out," I said.

I cut more of the saplings, five feet in length, then got the lariat off my saddle, binding her so that she couldn't move. She was trussed up like Wes had been that night of his capture, and I thought of the tragedy she had brought to men. Because of her two of them had gone down under gunfire. A third had forfeited his life on a hangman's

scaffold. The fourth lay in pain, his thigh bone fractured.

DAD and Bill Durham came back, driving the ranch rig, loaded down with quilts and blankets, and we got them in, lying side by side. She was, thank God, still unconscious. We returned to the ranch and carried her into her room while Bill helped Luke down to the bunkhouse. About that time Quong and the doctor arrived, astride two of Andy's livery horses.

He was a new man in Montrose and not used to riding horseback. But he went straight into her room, followed by Mildred and Ruth. I sat in the kitchen with Dad and drank coffee while Ruth made repeated trips with pans of hot water and Mildred tore up sheets for bandages. The smell of some kind of strong medicine filled the house. I got up and shoved both hands deep into my pockets and went out to the corral. A noise came from the stable and I looked in through the door. It was Quong. He sat on one of Susie's grain sacks, the horse hair bridle that Wes Allen had made in prison between his fingers, and damned if he wasn't crying!

He looked up and saw me and dashed a hand into his eyes. "She never faltered, Jim. She never stumbled once. She was still running when she went down with me in the middle of the street. When I got up and went to her she was dead," he finished, chokingly. "How's Lenore?"

"Pretty bad, I guess, Quong. The Doc's been in there nearly an hour now. Let's go over to the house."

The doctor was in Lenore's room more than two hours. When he finally emerged, in his shirt sleeves, sweat beaded his forehead. His face was grey from exhaustion.

"Well, doctor?" Dad asked, eyes on the man's bony countenance.

He was in his sixties at least, a very thin man, and that hard ride out from town must have been plain torturous hell. He reached for the towel above the wash bench and wiped away the sweat.

"I got here just in time," he said. "You can thank your Chinese there for saving her life. Another twenty minutes might have been too late."

"Then she'll live?"

"Yes, Mr. Devers, she'll live . . .but —" he hesitated.

"Let's have it, Doc," I cut in.

"She'll be in bed from eight months to a year. I did what I could but I very much fear it wasn't enough. You see, the end of the thigh bone—the knob that fits into the socket in the pelvis—is smashed. So is the bone itself. Very badly, Mr. Devers. She'll have a stiff thigh for the rest of her life and the leg itself probably will be a little shorter than the other."

"I see," Dad said softly. "Well . . . you'd better go down and set Luke's leg. It's broken between the thigh and knee."

We spent the rest of the afternoon around the ranch, tip-toeing through the kitchen and speaking in subdued tones. And waiting. We waited until almost nine that night before my sister finally regained consciousness and took a drink of water from the doctor. Luke lay in the bunkhouse, cursing and grunting by turns. His leg was giving him plenty of hell that pills couldn't stop. He called for a drink of water and I gave him one. When I went back into the kitchen Quong was busy at the little table close by the stove.

I bent down and stared at what he was doing.

"Where the devil did you get hold of old Ching's pipe?" I demanded.

He put a finger to his lips, speaking

low voiced. "Ching left me his belongings when he went Over," he answered simply. "He was a good old Chinese."

"He was a strange old Chinese," I grunted. "The old heathen never would tell me about giving you those moccasins."

"He told me," Quong said, rolling the little pill and laying it aside while he lit the tiny alcohol burner. "According to what he said, I stumbled in to his place with a bad cut on the back of my head that he bandaged, my slippers in shreds. I must have walked for a good many miles. Quite a ways, when you consider that Hoogan is the only town within thirty miles of here."

"Don't you r e m e m b e r anything about it?"

HE SHOOK his head, busy over the burner. "I seem to have stayed with him for a week or ten days and then wandered out again one night. I don't remember, Jim. The nearest recollection I have is that I seemed to be hunting something. I hunted and hunted, like a man walking in a dream. Then everything became clear and I found Susie up there among the rocks and you came along and spoke to me."

He finished with the pill, put it into the pipe, and I followed him back into the bunk room, trying to appear casual though my heart was pounding. He went over to the bunk to where Luke lay on his back, glaring at the ceiling.

"I've brought you something to ease the pain in that leg, Luke," Quong said.

Luke stared suspiciously at the pipe. "What are you trying to do, Chink—make a hophead out of me?" he demanded.

Quong smiled patiently. "Luke, like all Western people, you have the wrong idea about opium. It's not habit forming in the least when used to ease pain. It's the only way you'll get any sleep tonight."

"You go to hell!" Luke Osborn snarled, half raising a hand across his chest to knock the pipe aside. "I'll take the pain anytime."

"All right, Luke. I'm only trying to help you. If you'll take a few puffs of this you'll be sound asleep in no time."

"Get it out of here," Luke half shouted.

Quong shrugged and took away the pipe. In the kitchen he winked at me and nodded toward the burner. I went up to the house to see how Lenore was making out. When I came back about ten thirty to turn in for the night Luke Osborn was already asleep, the half smile on his face telling of a world of beautiful dreams. The pipe, its long stem still damp, lay on a chair beside the bunk.

"So he took it, huh?" I whispered to Quong, in the kitchen.

He nodded, his almond eyes somber, almost sad. "Yes, he took it and I feel sorry for him. But I've got to protect her, Jim. You see . . . pardner, I knew her . . . back in the past. I killed her, Jim. And all the way in on that terrible run this afternoon some voice that I've heard before kept telling me to hurry, hurry, hurry, that there was so little time; and I knew then why I was sent back. I know you don't believe me, pardner. But someday, perhaps, you'll learn to understand."

He turned, in his sock feet now, and for the first time since he had come to the ranch he was all Oriental as he padded into the other room to his bunk.

The weeks rolled by and I forgot about leaving, figuring to wait until the summer hay was in stacks. I knew now that Quong would never go with me, for Quong had changed much. He no long-

er laughed in the easy going way of the past. He made no more mention to me of his "other lives." He went his way about the ranch, doing a thousand little things for Lenore, but sometimes when his eyes watched Luke I saw something in them that made me shiver.

He hated Luke, and bided his time.

I waited, a little uneasy, a little uncertain, working hard at spring branding and visiting with Lenore every day. She was able to sit up in bed a little, Ruth propping her with pillows; and once I sat down on the covers beside her. Her face was only slightly marred. She still possessed her green-eyed beauty. But that splinted, shattered leg and hip . . .

"Well, sis," I said to her that day, taking her hand in mine and feeling a little shame-faced, "I guess you really hate me for what happened."

"Hate you? Why, Jim?"

"If it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't be here like this. You'd be married and living in Montrose by now."

She smiled and patted my arm with a weak, thin hand. "I'm glad, Jim. Terribly glad. Do you want me to tell you a secret? Cross your heart like you did when we were kids."

I made the cross.

"I wouldn't have lived with Luke a month. I went with him because I was lonesome and thinking of Wes—trying to run away from something people can't run away from. And the secret, Jim, is that I loved Wes Allen. He was the only man I ever loved or can love. We were two of a kind, just like he always said, and I belonged to him. I should have gone with him the first night he came back for me. He was mean and cruel in many ways, but I still worshipped every pound of him. So I'm glad things turned out this way for Luke and I. We've all got a price to pay for our mistakes and I'm paying for the deaths of Joe Docker and Slim and Wes. You were right about the notches, Jim. I killed three men. No . . . don't try to tell me different. I killed three men, including the only one I loved."

SHE turned her head away and began to cry softly and I got up. There wasn't any use in telling her that Luke Osborn was going to do a little paying on his account too.

He was hitting old Ching's pipe quite regularly now every evening, saying he would quit when his leg got well, not realizing that the drug already had him in its implacable grip. He played a lot of solitaire to keep his hands in shape, a gambling man who couldn't stay away from a deck of cards. And it got to be a nightly habit to wheel him over to the table, where Quong began playing with him.

Playing is the right word. Quong was the inscrutable Chinese gambler now, and he toyed with Luke as a cat plays with a live mouse, bleeding him dry as Luke had bled Dad.

Nor will I ever forget the night that Luke Osborn, his head in the clouds from a big pipe of opium, bet his store against seven thousand dollars in cash, backing a straight flush. Quong won with a royal flush.

And if Luke hadn't been so high on the hop, his gambler's eyes would have noticed the little holes in the cards Quong laid down. That was the hand that had started Dad signing the first of his IOU's that almost destroyed our lives. That hand, taken from the wall when Quong's money closed up the domino parlor, had destroyed Luke Osborn. He was cleaned out; penniless.

I went out into the kitchen, leaving Luke sitting at the table a dull, half comprehending look on his face. Quong

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followed me in, handing over the order for him to take charge of the store.

"What's all this?" I asked him, puzzled.

"A new life, Jim. You were right about wanting to leave the ranch. You've done your job here, as I've done mine. But we're still pardners. So in the morning I'd like you to go in town and take over the store for us. Your father can run the ranch by himself now. Rent Mrs. Devers' house and live there and build your new life around that store. I'll be in to help you in a few months, when Lenore gets better."

Dad was shaving at his favorite place beside the kitchen door the next morning when I went up to the house. He turned, razor poised as I entered the big room.

"Morning, son," he greeted. "Where are you working today?"

"I'm not," I said. "I'm leaving, Dad."

"Oh, no, Jim!" gasped out Mildred. "Oh, Jim—you can't!"

"He'll leave if he says he's going to, hon," Dad grinned at her. "He's a Devers all the way through—and a damn big one too."

"I'm not going very far, just in to town," I told him.

"I'm glad to hear it, Jim. And as long as you're going, put Luke in the wagon and take him in. I'm sick and tired of his face and his blasted grumbling all the time. The way he expects the womenfolk to wait on him, you'd think he owns the ranch."

"He doesn't own anything . . . now," I said. "Quong won his store and all his money in a big poker game last night down in the bunkhouse. That's why I'm leaving. I'm taking over."

Dad almost dropped his razor. He stared. Then he burst out laughing.

"Well, I'll be dog-goned, son! So

it's no more cattleman, eh? You're going to be a merchant."

"I'm going to take a stab at it," I answered, stubbornly.

"Only twenty years old and never off the ranch in his life and now he's going to be a storeman." He was happy about it, and teasing me to cover it.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," Ruth exclaimed. "And I'm glad, Jim. Lenore will be too."

I STOOD there, shaggy-haired, unshaved, my shirt and pants faded and worn from hard work, six feet five inches tall in spurred boots; and in that moment, I think, came the answer as to why I was always so uncomfortable in her presence. I loved Ruth Rogers. It must have been that way since Lenore and me had ridden our ponies in town and picked her up on the way to school. The uneasiness I felt in her presence stemmed from a knowledge that I wasn't like other men. I was too big, fit only to work a ranch—or kill a man with my two hands.

I took Luke in town that morning, leaving the team at the livery and moving into Dad's old room at the hotel until the Ansons could move out of Mildred's rented house. I went straight to the barber shop and got my hair cut short on top and then bought a pair of shoes with low heels. There wasn't a new suit in the county that would fit me. Luke's manager, a shrewd but friendly man, measured me and we sent out an order by telegraph.

Work in the store was different and I liked it. The cow business I knew; there was nothing more to learn. But a new world had been opened up and I dug in hard, studying accounts and book keeping and wholesale prices. The place was doing good, and when word quickly spread that Big Jim Devers and Lin Quong now owned it,

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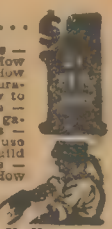

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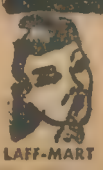

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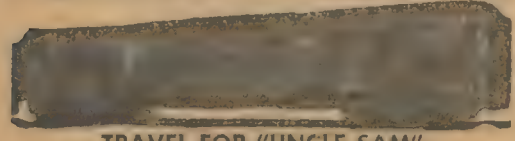

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business got better. People forgot Luke Osborn, alone in a two dollar a week room with a small package Quong had given him when we left the ranch.

Ruth came in one afternoon, when the rent was up, and we spent several hours fixing Hal's comfortable house—her home—into bachelor quarters. I was a little less uneasy in her presence now, contact with the public having taught a lot. Or maybe it was the new suit and low heeled shoes.

She finished and mounted her horse and rode down town. I went over to the store to help close up, had supper, and about dark strolled away from the main street. I'd been going out to Mom's grave almost every night, sitting down with my back to the stone tree trunk and explaining to her about Dad and how tings had turned out for all of us. I knew she'd understand. The night was warm and the stars out clear and bright. From the line of trees on the west edge of the cemetery came bell-like tones of night birds singing.

I was at my usual place that night when, through the gloom, there came the movement of something in white. I stiffened, watching as it moved toward Hal Rogers' grass covered grave. It was Ruth. She dropped to her knees and I heard her voice, soft and gentle, as it had come that night when Lenore came home.

"Dear God, take care of Hal and Wes and Slim, and even poor Joe. Keep them in Your care. Take care and watch over mother and Dad Devers. Help Lenore to get well. And help me too, Dear God. Make *him* understand. He doesn't know that all these years, ever since we went to school together, that . . . he just *won't* look at me at the ranch. Make him care for me just a little. Make him realize how much I love him . . ."

Well, I came up off Mom's grave as though my legs had buggy springs under them. My shoe must have rattled a stone, because when I started running she got quickly to her feet. She didn't flee. Nobody could fail to recognize my gaunt six feet four. She came running toward me with her arms spread wide and I swept her up, holding her tight while her lips murmured softly, happily, "Oh, Jim! Big Jim! . . . So you were out here too? Jim, Jim—Big Jim, I love you so much."

She took my face between her hands and, while I held her off the ground, kissed me again and again and again. . .

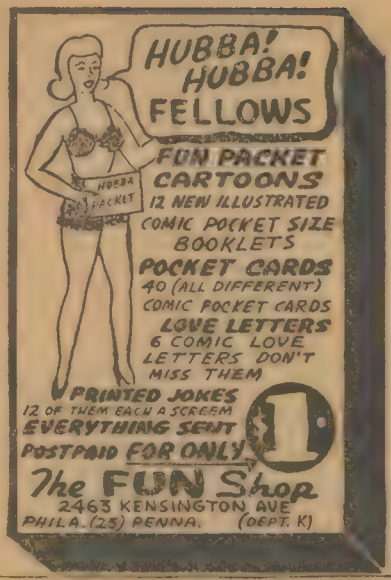
CHAPTER XXIX

FIFTY-FIVE years.

I drove the skidding, wheel chained car over to the curb in front of the store, sleet still beating against the windshield, and got out into the driving wind. You wouldn't have recognized the old stone schoolhouse in front of where Wesley Allen had shot down Joe Docker that night in the long ago. The street in front of it was paved and lined on each side with modern buildings. Years ago Quong and I had torn away the two columns and concrete porch and expanded the place. The big auditorium where we had danced had a concrete floor that held all the farm implements and my office, glass enclosed, was up where the stage had been.

I opened the door for Lenore. She emerged with her cane, standing on her stiff, shortened leg, a dried up little woman of seventy-two. I said to Ruth, in the rear seat, "Come, mother," and helped her out. We were both seventy.

Luke Osborn had been dead for more than forty years. They had found him, dirty and alone in his broken down shack on the edge of town, wrists



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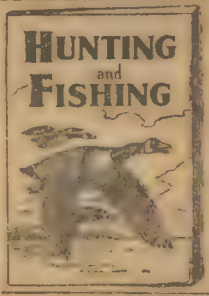

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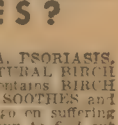

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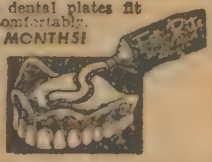

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slashed with a razor because there was no more money for opium.

I looked up at the facade with its big painted sign, *Devers & Quong, General Merchants*, and we all went inside. I was still remembering how old Quong had looked in his coffin, dressed in the riding outfit he hadn't worn in almost fifty years.

My eldest son, Ed Devers, forty-nine and looking much like his grandfather had looked, came up. He was managing the business now.

"Hello, Pap," he said. "Mom, you and Aunt Lenore look cold. Better go over to the heater and get warm. Pap, Joe Lee is up in your office waiting for you."

I nodded and went up the steps and entered my office. Joe Lee got up, smiling. He was a thin, slightly stooped scholarly young Chinese wearing thick lensed glasses. He'd been old Quong's secretary and companion for several years.

"Hello, Joe," I greeted him. "Sit down. How come you didn't show up at the funeral?"

"It was Quong's instructions that I wait for you here, Mr. Devers," Joe said. "I was to give you this. I believe it contains, among other things, his will," and he handed me a big Manila envelope. "I wrote it out the day before yesterday, a few hours before he died."

I took the envelope, staring at his bespectacled Oriental face. "Are you telling me, Joe, that old Quong knew he was going to die at a certain time?" I demanded.

"Why, of course, Mr. Devers. Such things are not uncommon. I've read of many such cases. Why, I believe that even Cochise, the Apache chief who died in Arizona around the year eighteen hundred and seventy-five or six told his men the evening before he

went Across that he would go the next morning. If I remember the details, they carried him up on a high point where he could see the sun for the last time as he starter Over."

I undid the metal clasp of the envelope and pulled out the contents. In more than fifty years, since the last days on the old home ranch, Quong and I had not again mentioned his strange beliefs about his past. I glanced at the will.

It was short and simple. Twenty-five thousand dollars to Joe Lee. Quong's half of the store and two other buildings to me. His big home and more than one hundred and forty thousand dollars in cash to Mrs. Edgar Holcomb.

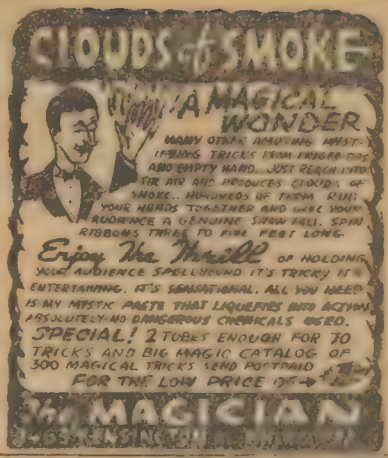
That was all.

I UNFOLDED the letter he had dictated and a small picture fell out; a very, very old picture. It showed Lenore, at sixteen, in long dress and wide brimmed woman's hat, standing beside me, tall and gangling in knee high boots at fourteen. It had been taken in front of the old saloon where Andy Calders first tended bar. I laid the picture on the desk, knowing that Wes Allen hadn't lost it after all. Quong had taken it.

Dear Jim, (the letter began)

My job here is finished. I shall not say goodbye to you. How can people say such things when they are together to the end of time? But the voice has been calling, calling, calling all this day, telling me to come. The summons come quite plainly and my spirit, reaching out from this, my earthly body, is eager to go. They say for me to hurry, that I must come Over.

It may not be that, in protecting her with the methods I used against poor Luke Osborn, I have broken the Laws they taught me before. This I shall learn in due time. If it be so, then I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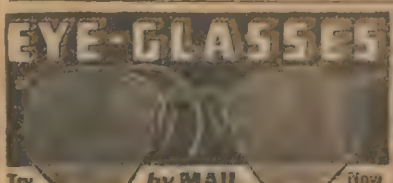

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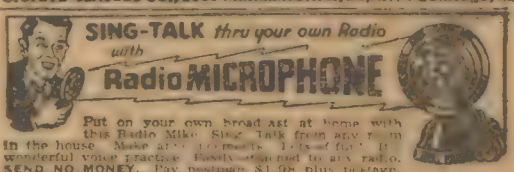

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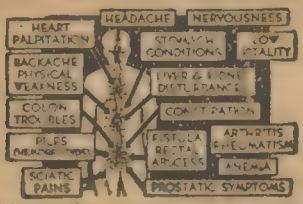

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have failed a mission and must expiate my sins again. But they are very kind on the Other Side, and might give me another chance. This I shall soon find out, Jim, for I am taking leave.

We shall meet again one day. Quong.

There was a postscript but as I started to read it Joe cleared his throat. I looked up.

"Yes, Joe?"

"There were a few final instructions from Quong, Mr. Devers," he said, hesitatingly. "I am to stay on in the big house and look after Mrs. Holcomb. If you have no objections, I shall carry out those instructions."

"I'd be pretty happy about it if you will, Joe," I told him. "But tell me—did old Quong ever discuss with you anything about his belief that he lived a long time ago, in another age?"

He looked surprised. "Why, yes, Mr. Devers. Many times."

"What do you think?"

"I'm Chinese too, Mr. Devers. We have certain beliefs concerning such things. I recall that he once mentioned an incident back in San Francisco—"

San Francisco!

So Quong *had* known something about his "present" life! Had he known all along? Had his memory suddenly come back to him at some period in his later years? If it was true that his mind was a blank, then how could he recall "happenings" of an earlier life?

Or was it that Quong, worshipping Lenore as he did and realizing the barrier between them, had built up in his own mind a life of the past with her, feeding his hunger on a fantastic dream of vicarious love?

I raised the letter in my hands to read the postscript. A guest of wind struck the windows and rattled more driving sleet again the pane. Joe Lee wanted silently as I finished reading.

"P. S. I sign myself Quong, because I have no recollection of parents or any name they might have given me. It was the first one that came to mind that morning so many years ago when I emerged from the void, hunting for Susie, and you spoke to me."

I picked up the old picture and studied it again, then folded the letter and replaced it in the envelope. A hundred conflicting emotions went scudding like snow clouds through my mind. Out of them came clearly the words of the minister out there in the cemetery.

"It makes no difference of what race, creed, or color a man might be . . ."

It sure hadn't made any difference to me.

Quong was my pardner.

THE JINX THAT GALLOPED

(Concluded from page 81)

lay his hands on him once more, and saw him tried, found guilty on all counts and sentenced to Folson Prison for the term of his natural life. But on April 2, 1882, when it was almost time to send him to Folsom, Dick staged a spectacular escape, stole his jailer's pistol, and fled. Two blocks from the jail he found a horse staked out to graze. Using no discretion whatever, Dick mounted the animal bareback intending to ride him away.

Unknown to him the animal had been considered dangerous because he had nibbled some locoweed the week before. Dick had no chance at all. In less than one hundred yards, the horse threw a fit tossing the criminal high into the air and rolling him in the dust of the road. The sheriff was at the scene before Dick had a chance to recover his bearings, and in no time he was back behind bars where he belonged.

Horses were Dick's undoing. At every point in his unlawful career, they hastened his end. Hume had a horse to thank for almost every capture.

H. R. Stanton

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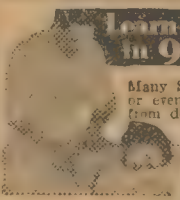

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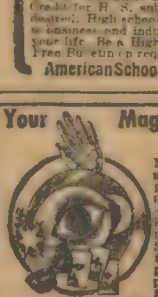

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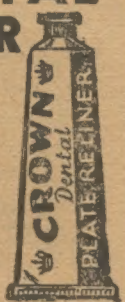

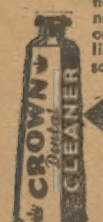

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IN BOOM TOWNS money flowed freely out of the pockets of the miners. The universal currency was gold nuggets or gold dust, and it was usually carried about in buckskin bags. The chief problem the miner faced was the safe-keeping of his earnings; banks were few and far between, and most mushrooming communities were without one. Merchants in a camp, who could boast of owning a safe, prospered.

When a purchase was made, the miner opened his pouch and handed it to the merchant, who extracted enough to pay for the goods. Every businessman had a pair of scales on his counter with the weights from a few grams to an ounce on which he would be able to decide the proper sum of dust to be taken in exchange for the article he was selling. Coins and paper money were rarely seen or used, and even the most inexpensive articles such as newspapers were purchased with gold dust. At prayer meetings it was a common sight to see a miner drop a pinch of gold dust in the collection plate. From time to time the merchants of the mining town would decide upon the standard price for gold. At Deadwood in 1877, gold sold for twenty dollars an ounce.

Ridiculous prices were charged for goods and services depending on scarcity and need. In the sixties in Montana a game of billiards, a gallon of milk, and a shave all cost the same price—one dollar. Food costs were very high and the staple diet was bacon, beef, bread, and coffee. When pies were baked and sold, they disappeared from sight very rapidly—even when, during periods of flour scarcity, wrapping paper was used for crust. These pies were sold at one dollar each, four slices to the pie. Women in Colorado who took in washing for a living charged three dollars for one dozen pieces.

Even when living costs were very high, some miners were very careless with their treasure, tossing their precious leather pouches about as if they had no value at all. At Virginia City, Montana, every morning the little boys swept up the floor of the business houses, took up the dust on shovels and washed the gold out, usually getting several dollars for their trouble.

Gambling was carried on night and day; the rattle of dice and the cry of the three-card-monte dealer could be heard whatever the hour. The gold gained after months of back-breaking labor would disappear in but a few minutes. Lack of money did not prevent gambling, however; a probate judge was seen to lose thirty Denver lots in less than ten minutes one Sunday morning, and the county sheriff pawned his revolver for twenty dollars to spend in betting at faro.

The miner's life was a hard one and a hectic one. The fortunes that he dreamed of digging out of the West often never materialized. And those few lucky ones who did make strikes saw their glimmering wealth slip through their fingers almost as fast as they could dig it out of the earth.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

Let your HEAD take you

(The average American today has a choice of just going where "his feet take him", or choosing wisely the course to follow. Let's skip ahead 10 years, and take a look at John Jones—and listen to him . . .)

"SOMETIMES I feel so good it almost scares me.

"This house—I wouldn't swap a shingle off its roof for any other house on earth. This little valley, with the pond down in the hollow at the back, is the spot I like best in all the world.

"And they're mine. I own 'em. Nobody can take 'em away from me.

"I've got a little money coming in, regularly. Not much—but enough. And I tell you, when you can go to bed every night with nothing on your mind except the fun you're going to have tomorrow—that's as near Heaven as man gets on this earth!

"It wasn't always so.

"Back in '46—that was right after the war and sometimes the going wasn't too easy—I needed cash. Taxes were tough, and then Ellen got sick. Like almost everybody else, I was buying Bonds through the Payroll Plan—and I figured on cashing some of them in. But sick as she was, it was Ellen who talked me out of it.

" 'Don't do it, John!' she said. '*Please* don't! For the first time in our lives, we're really saving money. It's *wonderful* to know that every single payday we have *more* money put aside! John, if we can only keep up this saving, think what it can mean! Maybe someday you won't have to work. Maybe we can own a home. And oh, how good it would feel to know that we need never worry about money when we're old!'

"Well, even after she got better, I stayed away from the weekly poker game—quit dropping a little cash at the hot spots now and then—gave up some of the things a man feels he has a right to. We didn't have as much fun for a while but we paid our taxes and the doctor and—we didn't touch the Bonds.

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